

War and Diplomacy in Pannonia and the Northwest Balkans during the Reign of Justinian

The Gepid Threat and Imperial Responses

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Introduction

Historians of Justinian's foreign policy have often followed Procopius in considering the Balkans a low priority, drained of manpower for wars of reconquest in the West and wars with Persia in the East.¹ According to this view, Justinian's policies in the Balkan region were restricted predominantly to diplomatic initiatives designed to minimize damage caused by Hun, Slav, and Germanic raiders.² I seek to redress this perception and demonstrate the significance, effectiveness, and aggressive nature of Justinian's Balkan policy, particularly his deployment of military resources in the region. I hope to do so by homing in on one of the major elements of this

policy: Justinian's confrontation of a Gepid threat to the northwest Balkans from southern Pannonia in the 540s and early 550s. Walter Pohl has often argued that Justinian's foreign policy vis-à-vis the Germanic kingdoms of Pannonia in this period should be understood principally in the context of the Gothic War in Italy. He portrays it as an aid to the recruitment campaigns of, successively, Germanus, John, nephew of Vitalian, and Narses, that was driven by a desire to secure the safe passage of their forces overland to Gothic Italy and to apply pressure on Totila's Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy through a series of alliances.³ Although I will

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1 A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602* (Oxford, 1964), 299; E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire* (Paris, 1949), 310, argues that Justinian considered the Balkans an irritating distraction from his other more grandiose military campaigns, referring to the area as “une entrave gênante.” Works on Justinian or Procopius have rarely devoted chapters specifically to Balkan affairs; see for instance, Av. Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (London, 1985); J. A. S. Evans, *The Age of Justinian* (New York, 1996); M. Maas, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge, 2005).

2 F. Wozniak, “Byzantine Diplomacy and the Lombard-Gepidic Wars,” *Balkan Studies* 20 (1979): 147, 157, recognizes the importance of Justinian's diplomatic responses to the Gepid-Lombard wars, but sees them as examples of “conciliatory opportunism,” driven by the military vulnerability of the Balkans in comparison with other arenas.

3 See W. Pohl, “The Empire and the Lombards: Treaties and Negotiations in the Sixth Century,” in *Kingdoms of Empire: The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity*, ed. W. Pohl (Leiden, 1997), 75–134. Although Pohl acknowledges the importance of the northern frontier as a reason for imperial involvement in Pannonia (p. 87), he argues that Procopius's coverage of the Gepid-Lombard disputes can be explained by the outbreak of war in Italy and that “the unusual deployment of two large armies in 549 and 552 can be understood in this context” (p. 91). See also idem, “Justinian and the Barbarian Kingdoms,” in Maas, *Age of Justinian*, 469; and idem, “Die Langobarden in Pannonien und Justinians Gotenkrieg,” in *Ethnische und kulturelle Verhältnisse an der mittleren Donau vom 6. bis zum 11. Jahrhundert*, ed. D. Bialeková and J. Zábajník (Bratislava, 1996), 31–32, on the obstruction of overland routes into Italy between 549 and 552 as a result of the Balkan crises, which he emphasizes delayed the campaign to Italy and were not a priority in themselves. Wozniak, “Byzantine Diplomacy” (n. 2 above), 150, also argues that the Italian campaign inflated the size of the Roman army deployed in Pannonia, and at 146 he stresses the demands placed upon Balkan manpower by this war.



FIG. 1. Rivers and cities referred to in this article.

acknowledge the connections between the Pannonian and Italian arenas, I will contradict Pohl's assessment by arguing that Justinian's Pannonian policy was driven to a great extent by a long-term strategy to ensure the security of the Balkan provinces. In doing so, I will emphasize that the military resources devoted to the Gepid-Lombard crises were largely unrelated to those later recruited to fight in Italy.

Closely related to these arguments will be the contention that by the 540s the Gepid kingdom of Thorisin, based in Pannonia Sirmiensis, with its capital at Sirmium, posed the most significant threat to the Balkan provinces and represented the central cause of the Gepid-Lombard-Roman conflicts that ensued (fig. 1). This contradicts much of the secondary literature on the Gepids to date. The Gepids have rarely been placed at the center of historical narratives, largely because of their demise in 567 and failure to leave behind a legitimizing history, as the Lombards and the Goths did. Consequently, the majority of works covering fifth- to sixth-century

Pannonian affairs are written from the perspective either of these groups or of the Romans.⁴

4 The following works look at the Gepid-Lombard crises in connection with the Lombards: J. Werner, *Die Langobarden in Pannonien: Beiträge zur Kenntnis der langobardischen Bodensünde vor 568* (Munich, 1962); K. Christou, *Byzanz und die Langobarden: Von der Ansiedlung in Pannonien bis zur endgültigen Anerkennung (500–680)* (Athens, 1991); N. Christie, *The Lombards* (Oxford, 1995); Pohl, "Empire and the Lombards" and "Die Langobarden in Pannonien" (both n. 3 above); I. Bóna, "Langobarden in Ungarn," *ActaArchHung* 7 (1956): 490–97. Others cover the Gepid-Lombard conflict of the early 550s in the course of discussing Jordanes' *Getica* and *Romana*: W. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988); and B. Croke, "Jordanes and the Immediate Past," *Historia* 54, no. 4 (2005): 473–94. Works such as Wozniak, "Byzantine Diplomacy" and I. Bóna, *The Dawn of the Dark Ages: The Gepids and the Lombards in the Carpathian Basin* (Budapest, 1976) focus specifically on the Gepid-Lombard wars but do not highlight the Gepid threat in particular. Wozniak acknowledges Roman frustration at the Gepids' occupation of Sirmium, but does not recognize the growth of Gepid military and naval power, discussed later

Constantin Diclescu's *Die Gepiden* of 1923 and Walter Pohl's article of 1980, "Die Gepiden und die Gentes an der Mittleren Donau nach dem Zerfall der Attilareiches," are the two principal works on the Gepids that are based largely upon literary evidence.⁵ Only Diclescu devotes much space to the Pannonian affairs of the mid-sixth century. Pohl takes his account up to 504 and includes only a brief section on the sixth-century history of the Gepids. Diclescu discusses the gravity of the Gepid threat to the Balkans by the mid-Justinianic period, but does not see this as the principal cause of the Gepid-Lombard conflicts. Although recognizing the survival of the Gepids as a major player in the middle Danube area between the mid-fifth and mid-sixth centuries, Pohl's work reinforces the impression that the Gepids were barbarian "also-rans," or poor relatives of the Goths. He does this by stressing that they lost the majority of their military encounters, rarely troubled the imperial authorities, and were happy to enjoy what he terms a "passive Hegemonie" both in Dacia and, on two brief occasions, in a limited area around the southern Pannonian city of Sirmium.⁶ In

in this article. Bóna tends to devote more attention to the Lombards because his work is in many sections largely based on Paul the Deacon's *History of the Langobards*. L. Schmidt, *Die Ostgermanen* (Munich, 1934), 529–46 has a section on the Gepids, in which he discusses the Gepid-Lombard conflicts of the mid-sixth century. Works on Justinian also include sections on these episodes. For instance, Pohl, "Justinian and the Barbarian Kingdoms" (n. 3 above), 466–71, and Stein, *Bas-Empire* (n. 1 above), 525–35.

5 W. Pohl, "Die Gepiden und die Gentes an der Mittleren Donau nach dem Zerfall der Attilareiches," in *Die Völker an der mittleren und unteren Donau im fünften und sechsten Jahrhundert*, eds. H. Wolfram and F. Daim (Vienna, 1980), 239–305; C. Diclescu, *Die Gepiden: Forschungen zur geschichte Daziens im frühen Mittelalter und zur Vorgeschichte des rumänischen Volkes* (Leipzig, 1923). A number of works have been written on the archaeology of the Gepids, a subject beyond the scope of this paper. See, for instance, K. Horedt, "The Gepidae, the Avars and the Romanic Population in Transylvania," in *Relations Between the Autochthonous Population and the Migratory Populations on the Territory of Romania*, ed. M. Constantinescu, S. Pascu, and P. Diaconu (Bucharest, 1975), 111–22, and "Gepiden in Siebenbürgen—Gepiden an der Theiß," *ActaArchHung* 33 (1981): 377–81; B. Magomedov, "Gepids in the 3rd–5th centuries A.D.," in *Ancient East and West*, ed. G. R. Tsetskhladze (Leiden, 2003); L. Bârzău, "Gepidische Funde von Bratei," *Dacia* 35 (1991): 211–14; L. Barkoczi and A. Salamon, "Remarks on the 6th Century History of Pannonia," *ActaArchHung* 23 (1971): 139–53.

6 Pohl, "Gepiden," 243, on the fifth-century roots of the Gepids' demise; 268–69, on their "passive Hegemonie" and the strength of their agricultural base; and 292, on Gepid inactivity post-488.

Pohl's opinion, the passive agricultural society of the Gepids meant that, once they were forced to participate in the Pannonian "big power politics" of the Justinianic period, they were doomed to failure.⁷ This deterministic argument, which relies much upon the demise of the Gepid kingdom in 567, has been accepted by Konstantinos Christou in his work on the Lombards.⁸ In a similar vein, Pohl's article "The Empire and the Lombards" refers to the Gepids as one of the "smaller groups" of the middle Danube area that were unable to survive a period of intensified inter-barbarian rivalries.⁹

I hope to redress these generally negative perceptions of the Gepids by homing in on the literary evidence for their role in Pannonian military and diplomatic affairs between the 520s and the 550s, when their demise was anything but assured. In particular, I will analyze the testimony of Procopius, demonstrating that his narrative on the Pannonian wars of the 540s and 550s presents the Gepids of King Thorisin as the most powerful group north of the Balkan provinces and, crucially, the root cause of a proliferation of wide-reaching Hunnic and Slavic raids on the Balkans in the late 540s and early 550s. I will first fill in the background of Gepid-Roman competition in Pannonia with a survey of early Gepid movements and of imperial authority in Pannonia in the fifth and early sixth centuries.

The Early History of the Gepids, AD 454–527

The Gepids are first discussed in earnest by the textual sources for the Hun Empire of Attila in the mid-fifth century.¹⁰ During this period, they were, under their king Ardaric, one of the most powerful components of Attila the Hun's confederation.¹¹ Ardaric's prestigious

7 Ibid., 299–301.

8 Christou, *Langobarden* (n. 4 above), 56.

9 Pohl, "Empire and the Lombards" (n. 3 above), 87.

10 Priscus, *Fragments*, in R. C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus* (Liverpool, 1981–83); and Jordanes, *Getica* (in *The Gothic History of Jordanes*, trans., with intr. and comm. by C. C. Mierow [Princeton, 1915]), who drew on Priscus.

11 Jordanes, *Getica* 38.199, relates that Attila valued the support of Ardaric and Valamer above all others. See C. D. Gordon, *The Age of Attila: Fifth-century Byzantium and the Barbarians* (New York, 1966), 60–111, and E. A. Thompson, *The Huns* (Oxford, 1996), 85–103, on the chronology and nature of Attila's conquests.

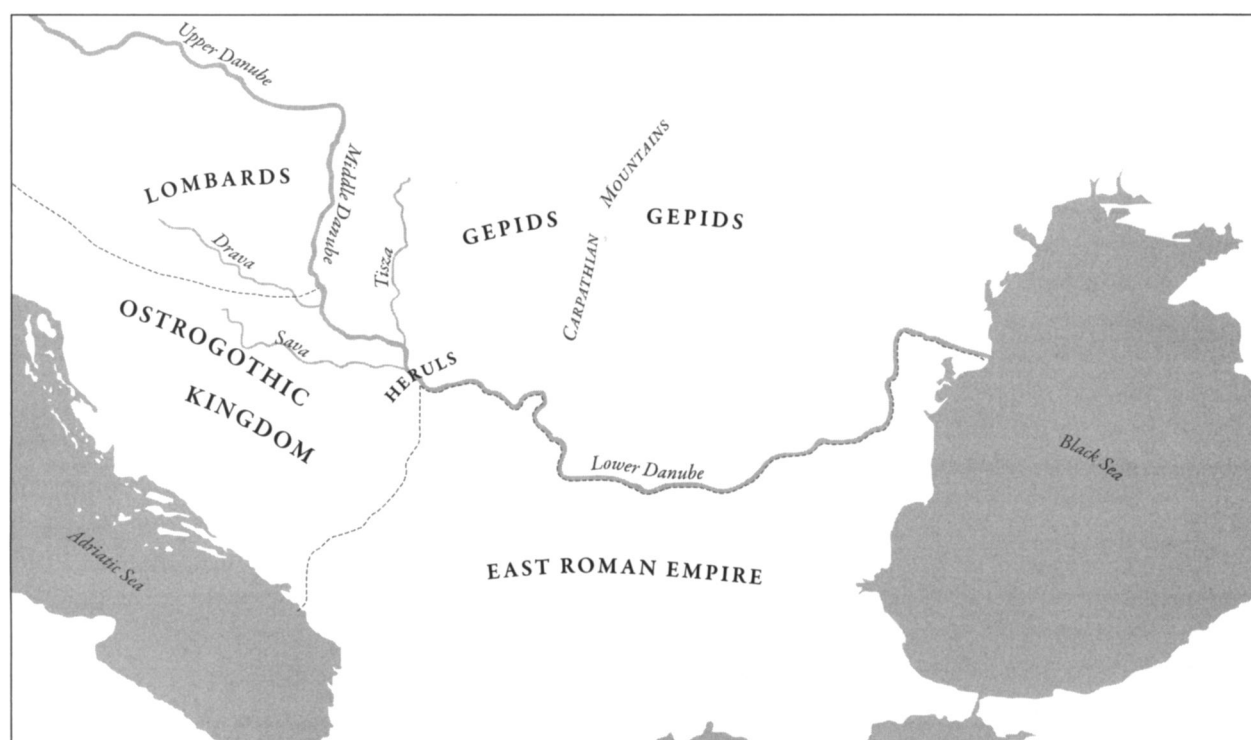


FIG. 2. The approximate location of the Gepids and the Lombards prior to the accession of Justinian.

status within the Hunnic Empire did much to unify his people, whose clan organization must have exerted a stronger influence in previous eras, from which there is only one brief record of a Gepid king.¹² Following the death of Attila in 453, and the disintegration of his empire in the subsequent period, the Gepids emerged as one of the most powerful barbarian groups north of the Danube. They led a coalition of forces against the sons of Attila and probably against the Goths at the battle of Nedao in 454, defeating their opponents and, afterward, establishing themselves in the heartland of Attila's empire—the Dacian lands east of the Tisza River (fig. 2).¹³ Meanwhile, the Goths

settled in Pannonia, where they fought a series of battles. Most importantly, they defeated the sons of Attila in 456, and an alliance of barbarian groups headed by the Suevi, and including the Gepids, at the battle of the Bolia River, in 469.¹⁴

According to Jordanes, the Goths migrated from Pannonia to the Balkan provinces in 473, having run out of suitable opposition in the former region.¹⁵ Modern historians have sometimes followed Jordanes, and have argued that the Gothic military elites had so exhausted the Pannonian area that it was no longer viable for them to remain there.¹⁶ However, Peter Heather has persuasively argued that, due to its Gothic

12 Jordanes, *Getica* 17.97–100 refers to a King Fastida in his discussion of a Gepid-Gothic war of the third century; Pohl, “Gepiden,” 247–48, on Ardaric's close relations with Attila, and their influence on the Gepids.

13 For the battle of Nedao, see Pohl, “Gepiden,” 252–63; P. Heather, *Goths and Romans 332–489* (Oxford, 1991), 246; H. Wolfram, *History of the Goths* (Berkeley–Los Angeles, 1988), 258–59; Dicușescu, *Gepiden* (n. 5 above), 60–69. The secondary works generally accept Jordanes' testimony (*Getica* 50.260–64) that the Gepids headed a coalition of tribes against the sons of Attila and

that Jordanes' silence regarding the Goths' participation probably implies their support for the Huns.

14 For post-Attila geopolitical reorganization and military encounters involving the Pannonian Goths, see Jordanes, *Getica* 50.264–56.288; Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 258–68; C. A. Macartney, “The End of the Huns,” *Byzantinisch-Neugriechische Jahrbücher* 10 (1934): 106–7; Pohl, “Gepiden,” 264–68; Heather, *Goths and Romans*, 240–72.

15 Jordanes, *Getica* 56.283.

16 Pohl, “Gepiden,” 267; Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 267.

bias, Jordanes' *Gothic History* probably plays down the impact that political and military competition in Pannonia had on the Goths' decision to migrate, and exaggerates their domination of the area.¹⁷ Given that the Goths had apparently vanquished all their competitors in the Pannonian region, it is strange that they should migrate to imperial provinces where there was no guarantee of political independence or economic prosperity.¹⁸ The death of the Gothic king Valamer in the battle of the Bolia River suggests that this was not a straightforward victory and that such battles were more damaging than is suggested by the *Getica*. Further, the notion that Pannonia was somehow barely inhabitable has been called into question by archaeological evidence of continued socioeconomic prosperity south of the Drava River, and by the fact that Gepids, Goths, and Avars continued to inhabit the region during the following centuries.¹⁹

Since the Gepids were the chief beneficiaries of the Goths' departure—acquiring the strategically vital city of Sirmium and part of Pannonia Sirmiensis—it seems very likely that they played some role in the military pressure alluded to above. The fierce intertribal military competition in the Pannonian region in the decades following Attila's death makes it unlikely that the Gepids merely walked unopposed into the lands vacated by the Goths.²⁰ However, our lack of textual evidence for the Gepids in these years means that this must remain a speculative point.

What little information does exist for the fifteen years following the Gothic migration focuses on the activities of the Goths in the Balkan provinces south of the Danube.²¹ It seems that the Gepids were then establishing themselves as the dominant power in Dacia and

southern Pannonia.²² Their settlement of Sirmium and the surrounding regions may have been carried out with Roman backing.²³ In 488 and 505, however, the Gepids were twice defeated by the Ostrogoths of Theoderic the Great, to whom they lost their foothold in Pannonia. In the first of these defeats, in 488, the Gepid king Thrapsila was killed. He had been attempting to bar the Goths' passage to Italy by blockading the river Vuka where it converged with the Danube. It is possible that the Gepid king had been in league with Odovacer, the Scirian general, who was in charge of the Western Roman Empire and was at the time based in Italy.²⁴ Given the earlier Scirian-Gepid alliances at the battles of Nedao and the Bolia River, this theory is not implausible, although it is unsubstantiated by textual evidence. The defeat of 488 was not catastrophic insofar as it did not end Gepid control of Pannonia Sirmiensis. The Goths proceeded to Italy after wintering in Pannonia.

In the long term, the secession from the Gepids of Mundo, the nephew of King Thrapsila, at around the same time as the defeat of 488 was more damaging.²⁵ Mundo's departure was apparently motivated by the accession of Thrapsila's son, Thrasaric, and by the Goths' offer of an alliance.²⁶ By the early 500s, this Gepid general, Mundo, dominated an area around the confluence of the Margus and Danube rivers in Upper Moesia. According to Jordanes, he commanded a band of outlaws, robbers, and ruffians.²⁷ Secondary works have accepted this unflattering account of Mundo's army.²⁸

17 Heather, *Goths and Romans*, 249–50.

18 Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 267, concedes that this is difficult to explain.

19 Heather, *Goths and Romans*, 249–50. Pohl, "Langobarden" (n. 3 above), 29; N. Christie, "The Survival of Roman Settlement along the Middle Danube: Pannonia from the 4th to the 10th century A.D.," *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 11 (1992): 317–39; and Christou, *Langobarden* (n. 4 above), 79–80, on the survival of Pannonian forts in the Justinianic period.

20 Pohl, "Gepiden," 288, sees the Gepids filling a vacuum created by the departure of the Goths.

21 Malchus, *Fragments* 15, 18, and 20, in Blockley, *Classicalising Historians* (n. 10 above).

22 Pohl, "Gepiden," 268, 295–97, speculates that the Gepids spent much of the later fifth century establishing their power base in Dacia, and contends that until 488, at the earliest, the Gepids were divided into two groups, one in Dacia and one in Pannonia, the former perhaps ruled by Giesmos, Mundo's father.

23 Ibid., 288–89, on the arguments for Roman involvement in the Gepids' settlement of southern Pannonia; Wozniak, "Byzantine Diplomacy" (n. 2 above), 140, views the Gepids as "federates of the Empire" beginning in 454.

24 Pohl, "Gepiden," 292; Wolfram, *History of the Goths* (n. 13 above), 280; Schmidt, *Ostgermanen* (n. 4 above), 293–95.

25 See B. Croke, "Mundo the Gepid: From Freebooter to Roman General," *Chiron* 12 (1982): 125–35, esp. 127–32, on the chronology of Mundo's life. See Pohl, "Gepiden," 290, on Mundo's parentage, origins, and defection to the Goths.

26 Pohl, "Gepiden," 290.

27 Jordanes, *Getica*, 58.301.

28 Pohl, "Gepiden," 293, refers to Mundo as "Räuberhauptmann"; Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 322, calls him "the Hunnic-Gepidic robber-chief-captain."

Mundo's power and influence in the middle Danube area during the subsequent decades would imply, however, that his forces were in fact more substantial and well organized than Jordanes implies.²⁹ As will be seen later in this article with the case of the Lombard exile, Ildiges, barbarian warlords in this period often commanded armies commensurate with those of barbarian kingdoms.³⁰ The gravity of the threat posed by Mundo to the Balkan provinces is clear from both the decision of the Roman emperor Anastasius I in 505 to send a large army against him, commanded by Sabinianus the younger and comprising ten thousand Bulgar allies, and from Mundo's defeat of this army in the vicinity of the Margus River with the help of the Gothic general Pitzas.³¹ The previous year, Pitzas had driven the Gepids from Sirmium, capturing the city and adding Pannonia Sirmiensis to the western Illyrian provinces already incorporated into Theoderic's Gothic kingdom. The Gepids apparently put up no resistance; Thrasaric even left his mother in Sirmium, to the mercy of the Goths. Mundo's defection from the Gepids contributed to their loss of Sirmium. Had they possessed a leader as militarily capable as Mundo, they might have held off the Goths.³² Mundo's defection also deprived them of substantial manpower; his army must have included a significant number of Gepids, given his status as an heir to the Gepid throne. Instead, within the first decade of the sixth century, the Goths and their ally Mundo gained the upper hand in Pannonia, consigning the remaining Gepids to their Dacian territories and the Romans to eastern Illyricum and Thrace.

This development was reinforced in 507 by the Gothic king Theoderic's alliance with the Herul king Rodolphus, whom he accepted as a son-in-law. According to Procopius, the latter headed the most powerful barbarian group in northern Pannonia at this time.³³ However, the emperor Anastasius subsequently managed to check the Goths' increasing domination of the barbarian world by way of alliances with the Franks

and the Lombards. The latter inflicted a crushing defeat on the Heruls in 508, forcing them to split into three groups and abandon their lands in the upper Danube area.³⁴ Anastasius also strengthened his hold over the diocese of Dacia, which is southeast of Pannonia. In 510, he gained possession of the southeast corner of Pannonia Sirmiensis, including the city of Bassianae, when Theoderic ceded it to the Empire (fig. 1).³⁵ Two years later, Anastasius formed an alliance with one group of Heruls and settled them in this area (fig. 2).³⁶

Meanwhile, the Gepids weathered the fallout from their defeats of 488 and 504. According to the little textual evidence that exists for Gepid activities in this period, they retained their Dacian lands and began to employ aggressive diplomatic and military policies. In the early 510s, they arranged a marriage alliance with a group of Lombards, who, following their annihilation of the Herul kingdom, had expanded southward from the Elbe region of Rugiland into Herulia in the upper Danube region.³⁷ In 517, the Gepids launched a devastating raid on the Balkan provinces. Marcellinus Comes records an attack by a contingent of "Getic" cavalry, which ravaged the Illyrian provinces of Macedonia Prima, Macedonia Secunda, Thessaly, and Epirus Vetus.³⁸ Historians have sometimes interpreted this as an attack by the Slavs, whom they argue were denoted by the term "Getae."³⁹ However, the Slavs were referred to as "Getic" only by Theophylact Simocatta, writing in the seventh century.⁴⁰ Contemporary sixth-century

34 See Christou, *Langobarden* (n. 4 above), 54–55, on the dating of the Lombard defeat of the Heruls to 508 rather than to 494. Stein, *Bas-Empire* (n. 1 above), 151, suggests the possible involvement of Anastasius in inciting the Lombard attack.

35 F. Nicks, "The Reign of Anastasius, 491–518" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 1998), 130; Stein, *Bas-Empire*, 156; Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 322–23; Christou, *Langobarden*, 59–61. For a map of Pannonian provinces and cities, see fig. 1 of this article.

36 Marcellinus Comes, *Chronicle*, year 512; Stein, *Bas-Empire*, 305.

37 On the Lombards' acquisition of Herul lands, see Christie, *Lombards* (n. 4 above), 22, and Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 323. On the Gepid-Lombard marriage alliance, see Christou, *Langobarden*, 62.

38 Marcellinus Comes, *Chronicle*, year 517.

39 B. Croke, *Christian Chronicles and Byzantine History, 5th–6th Centuries* (Aldershot, 1992), 132; idem, *Marcellinus Comes and His Chronicle* (Oxford, 2001), 70; A. A. Vasiliev, *Justin the First: An Introduction to the Epoch of Justinian* (Cambridge, 1950), 302–12.

40 Theophylact Simocatta, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta*, ed. and trans. Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby (Oxford–New York, 1986), 3.4.7.

29 Pohl, "Gepiden," 292–93, emphasizes Mundo's power and influence, which he contrasts with that of the Gepids in the same period.

30 See p. 31.

31 Jordanes, *Getica* 58.300; Marcellinus Comes, *The Chronicle of Marcellinus*, trans. B. Croke (Sydney, 1995), year 505.

32 See n. 29 above.

33 Procopius, *The History of the Wars*, trans. H. B. Dewing and G. Downey (Cambridge, MA–London, 1962), 6.14.8–11.

sources, including Jordanes' *Getica* and Procopius's *Wars*, make clear that at this time the term referred to Germanic peoples.⁴¹ Further, Diculesscu rightly points out that Marcellinus uses this generic term for "Germanic" barbarians to refer to the Gepids on numerous occasions, particularly when mentioning Mundo.⁴² By attacking the Illyrian provinces, the Gepids may have been taking advantage of the Romans' preoccupation with restoring order in the Thracian diocese, which had been disrupted by the rebellion of Vitalian, the *comes* of the Scythian federate troops, between 514 and 516.⁴³ To judge from the entry in Marcellinus's *Chronicle*, their attack was designed to exact from the Empire financial rewards and manpower. Marcellinus records that Anastasius sent one thousand pounds of gold with an official named Paul to the prefect of Illyricum, John, to ransom Roman prisoners.

The Gepid-Roman Alliance and Pressure on Gothic-held Sirmium, AD 527–535

Between the death of the Gothic king Theoderic in 526 and Belisarius's invasion of Gothic Italy in 535, the Roman emperor, Justinian, and the Gepid king, Elemundus, joined forces to threaten Gothic control of Sirmium and the province of Pannonia Sirmiensis. The death of Theoderic weakened the political unity of the Gothic kingdom and presented its opponents with an opportunity to apply additional pressure on its western Illyrian territories.⁴⁴ At some point in the early years of his reign, Justinian formed, or reinforced, an alliance with the Gepids, as a result of which he paid them tribute.⁴⁵ The main purpose of this agreement became apparent in approximately 527, when a Roman-sponsored

Gepid attack on Sirmium ended in defeat and prompted a Gothic revenge attack on the Roman fort of Gratiana in Upper Moesia. This series of events is alluded to in Cassiodorus's address to the senate of Rome in early 534, while he was praetorian prefect, and in Procopius's *Wars*, book 5, in its discussion of events leading up to the Roman invasion of Gothic Italy in 535.⁴⁶

Cassiodorus's speech is predominantly concerned with lauding the domestic and foreign achievements of the Gothic regent Amalasuntha. The first foreign policy success to which Cassiodorus alludes is the Goths' repulsion of an unnamed invading army and subsequent retaliation, as a result of which they captured part of the Danube. In an enigmatic and confusing statement, he makes clear his disinclination to discuss in detail the suffering inflicted by the Goths on the invading army for fear of offending the Goths' ally. This seems to confirm that the attackers were either Roman forces or allies. Furthermore, Cassiodorus suggests that the Goths' seizure of territory in the Danube region was contrary to the wishes of the emperor and prompted him to concede to the Goths a peace that had formerly been refused to others.

Some historians have dated this episode to 530, partly because of Cassiodorus's eulogy of the Ostrogothic general Wittigis, whom he records as having fought a battle at Singidunum, and partly according to Procopius's reference to Wittigis's heroic military performance against the Gepids in Pannonia.⁴⁷ However, Procopius is clearly referring to the earlier Gepid-Gothic war of 504–5, given that he places Wittigis's Pannonian service in the time of King Theoderic (d. 526).⁴⁸ Diculesscu argues that Procopius could not have been referring to the earlier war, as this would have made Wittigis too old to be appointed leader of the Goths in the mid-530s.⁴⁹ There is no reason, however, why he could not have been in his twenties in 504–5 and in his fifties by the time of

41 Procopius, *Wars* 3.2.3–6, confirms that the Gepids and the Goths were ethnically similar. He states that both were "Getic," or Germanic peoples, tall and blond, speakers of the Gothic language, and adherents to Arian Christianity.

42 Diculesscu, *Gepiden* (n. 5 above), 122. See Marcellinus Comes, *Chronicle*, year 505 on Mundo.

43 On the rebellion of Vitalian, see Nicks, "Reign of Anastasius" (n. 35 above), 67–68, and Croke, *Chronicle* (n. 31 above), 116–20, notes to his translation.

44 A point made by Diculesscu, *Die Gepiden*, 120.

45 Procopius, *Wars* 7.33.9 refers to the *syntaxeis* (tributary payments), which the Gepids had been receiving from the Romans prior to their annexation of Sirmium in 536.

46 Cassiodorus, *Cassiodori Senatoris Variae*, ed. T. Mommsen (Berlin, 1894), book 11, letter 1, specifically lines 10–12, 329; Procopius, *Wars* 5.3.15 records Justinian's complaint to Amalasuntha that, in conducting a war against the Gepids about Sirmium, the Goths had attacked the Roman city of Gratiana.

47 See Christou, *Langobarden* (n. 4 above), 65, on the various dates given by historians for this event. Wolfram, *History of the Goths* (n. 13 above), 323, Schmidt, *Ostgermanen* (n. 4 above), 534, and Diculesscu, *Gepiden*, 121, date the battle to 530.

48 Procopius, *Wars* 5.11.5.

49 Diculesscu, *Gepiden*, 121.

his appointment in 536. Cassiodorus's only chronological reference to the Gepid attack on Sirmium suggests that an earlier dating is to be preferred. He suggests that it took place at the beginning of Amalasuntha's regency, "when a new ruler's precarious power is apt to be most assailed," perhaps in 526 or 527.⁵⁰

Cassiodorus's vague allusion to a series of events that was apparently well known to his audience cannot form the basis of an accurate reconstruction. Only a few speculative comments can be made. Considering that Gothic-held Pannonia Sirmiensis bordered the Roman province of Upper Moesia, and that it had been the object of Roman-Gothic-Gepid military and diplomatic competition during the 500s, it represents the most obvious target of the Roman or Roman-sponsored attack. In this case, the Goths quite probably captured a section of the Danube northeast of Pannonia Sirmiensis, where it flows south across the Hungarian plain toward Singidunum. Cassiodorus's reluctance to embarrass the Eastern Roman emperor can be explained by the close diplomatic relationship between Amalasuntha and Justinian at the time of his speech.

Procopius's discussion of a Gothic-Roman dispute in the Danube region during the late 520s is also set against the backdrop of Roman-Gothic diplomacy in 534. According to Procopius, Justinian wished to secretly encourage Amalasuntha's desire to relinquish the Gothic kingdom to him, and, in 534, dispatched an emissary named Alexander to express three grievances to the Gothic regent.⁵¹ These included the Goths' hostile treatment of Gratiana, a Roman city in Illyricum. Gratiana has been tentatively identified as Saldum (fig. 1), the site of a late Roman fort situated on the south bank of the Danube in the Iron Gates gorges.⁵² Procopius claims that while making war on the Gepids near Sirmium, the Goths had treated Gratiana as a hostile city. He mentions the episode on two further

occasions: in Justinian's letter to Amalasuntha, in which he accuses her of causing Gratiana irreparable damage; and in Amalasuntha's speech in reply, excusing the act as the innocent mistake of Gothic soldiers.⁵³ Procopius's short, indefinite, and anecdotal background to the dispute offers neither chronological information nor explanations for the Gepid-Gothic war and resultant Gothic assault on Gratiana. This is not surprising if we bear in mind that Procopius served in Africa between 533 and 536, and was presumably piecing his account together secondhand from oral and written sources.

Cassiodorus and Procopius seem to offer contrasting representations of the same incident. It can be no coincidence that both recorded Roman-Gothic tension in early 534 regarding an earlier military episode in the Danube region. Cassiodorus's emphasis on the Gothic victory over the Romans was perhaps intended to dampen criticism from the Gothic notables of Amalasuntha's policy of rapprochement with Justinian. Procopius's depiction of the Gratiana episode as a Gothic miscalculation during an inter-barbarian war is understandable in light of his generally favorable portrayal of Justinian's relationship with Amalasuntha. This hinges on his assertion that Amalasuntha was willing to concede Italy to Justinian, a statement that serves in part to justify Justinian's invasion of the peninsula in 535.⁵⁴

Both sources concur that the Goths achieved a military success in the area, resulting in Justinian's displeasure. Cassiodorus's indication that a Gothic attack on Gratiana was instigated by Roman provocation is more convincing than Procopius's explanation of it as an accident that was only aggravated by the Gepids. It is unlikely that the Goths would have mistakenly penetrated eastern Illyricum without some degree of Roman provocation, when Amalasuntha's power was vulnerable and relations with Constantinople were tense. This confusion could be explained if the Gepids had been incited and perhaps assisted by the Romans in their attack on the Goths at Sirmium. This hypothesis is reinforced by the Gepid-Roman tributary alliance of the early Justinianic period. Some historians have suggested that Mundo and the Heruls participated in the attack on Gothic-held Sirmium.⁵⁵ Considering

50 Stein, *Bas-Empire* (n. 1 above), 308, places the battle prior to Mundo's appointment as *magister militum per Illyricum*, while Wozniak, "Byzantine Diplomacy" (n. 2 above), 143, dates it to 527 or 528.

51 Procopius, *Wars* 5.3.14–18.

52 P. Petrović and M. Vasić, "The Roman Frontier in Upper Moesia: Archaeological Investigations in the Iron Gates Area, Main Results," in *Roman Limes on the Middle and Lower Danube*, ed. P. Petrović (Belgrade, 1996), 202; J. J. Wilkes, "The Roman Danube: An Archaeological Survey," *JRS* 155 (2005): 209, mentions Saldum in his survey of Danubian archaeological sites.

53 Procopius, *Wars* 5.3.21.

54 Ibid. 5.3.12.

55 Stein, *Bas-Empire*, 307–8; Wozniak, "Byzantine Diplomacy," 144.

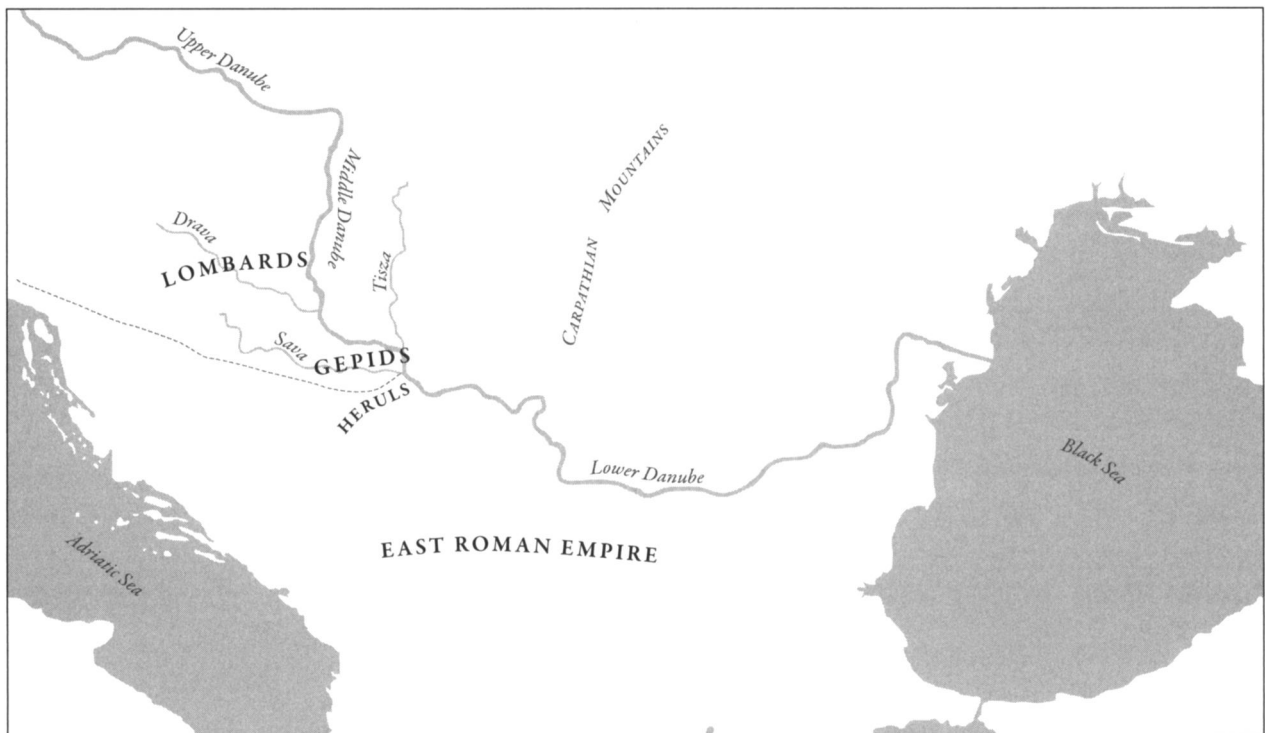


FIG. 3. The approximate location of Gepids, Heruls, and Lombards after AD 536.

Mundo's heavy involvement in the military affairs of Illyricum in the late 520s, both before and after his appointment as *magister militum per Illyricum* in 529, it is not improbable that he could have played some role, although this is not confirmed by the literary evidence.

Following the attack on Gothic-held Sirmium in 527, Justinian continued to threaten the area by reinforcing military and diplomatic control over the Dacian provinces of Dacia Mediterranea and Upper Moesia. According to Malalas's chronicle, in 528 Justinian received and baptized the Herul king Grepes in Constantinople along with an entourage of senators and family members.⁵⁶ This would have occurred in the context of Justinian's bestowing upon the Heruls lands near Singidunum in Upper Moesia and the arrangement of tributary payments, mentioned by Procopius (fig. 3).⁵⁷ Like Malalas, Procopius refers to Justinian's

Herul alliance as taking place early in his reign, and emphasizes religious conversion as its key element. Thus, Justinian strengthened political, cultural, and military ties with a group that had been settled in Illyricum as federates by the emperor Anastasius in 512. Historians have surmised that the lands he gave them were west of Singidunum and south of the Sava River, bordering an initial area of settlement around the city of Bassianae in Pannonia Sirmiensi.⁵⁸ In view of the increasingly volatile political situation in Pannonia, it was vital for the empire to bolster the Herul buffer zone against further Germanic incursions into Illyricum.

Justinian's military influence in northern Illyricum was further enhanced by the recruitment of the formidable Gepid warlord, Mundo, as *magister militum per Illyricum* in 529.⁵⁹ Mundo's extensive experience in military and political affairs of the middle Danube and Sava regions undoubtedly bolstered Roman influence there.⁶⁰ It is likely that Mundo had defected from the Goths in 526, when the

56 John Malalas, *Chronographia*, ed. I. Thurn (Berlin, 2000), or *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, trans. E. Jeffreys et al. (Melbourne–Sydney, 1986), book 18, entry 6.

57 Procopius, *Wars*, 6.14.33–35 and 7.33.13–14. On the Roman–Herul alliance, see Wozniak, “Byzantine Diplomacy,” 144; Stein, *Bas-Empire*, 305, and Schmidt, *Die Ostgermanen* (n. 4 above), 554.

58 Stein, *Bas-Empire*, 305.

59 Malalas, *Chronographia* 18.46.

60 A point made by Stein, *Bas-Empire*, 308–9.

death of Theoderic the Great ended his obligation to serve them.⁶¹ As general of Illyricum, one of his key roles was to exercise control over the Herul federates, as indicated by his arrival at Constantinople during the Nika riot of 532 accompanied by an entourage of Herul soldiers.⁶² He was also instrumental in keeping the Gepid allies in check. This is highlighted by his confrontation and defeat of an incursion by this group in 530. Marcellinus merely states that Mundo was the first Roman general to attack “Getic” raiders who had been traversing Illyricum. He killed and put to flight a number of them before leaving for Thrace to attack Bulgar raiders.⁶³ Once again, Diculesscu’s association of Marcellinus’s “Getae” with the Gepids is persuasive.⁶⁴ The Gepids’ attack may have been a reaction to their defeat at the hands of the Goths in 530, and confirms the aggressive nature of their foreign policy by this point.

Christou has speculated that Justinian also established diplomatic relations with the Lombards early in his reign. The Lombards had been living in the northern Pannonian provinces of Pannonia I and Pannonia Valeria since the early to mid-520s (figs. 1–2).⁶⁵ However, there is no textual evidence to substantiate this claim and I will argue later in this paper that the major Roman-Lombard treaty mentioned by Procopius as existing in 539 was not concluded until after 536.⁶⁶

Justinian’s eleventh novella, promulgated in April 535, reinforces the impression that imperial control had been reestablished over the Dacian diocese by the mid-530s and confirms the symbolic value of Sirmium, of which Justinian, as a native of Illyricum, was well aware. The novella proclaims the establishment of an archbishopric at the newly founded city of Justiniana Prima in Dacia Mediterranea, and refers to the movement of the Illyrian prefecture from Thessalonica to this city, presumably in the early

530s.⁶⁷ This realignment of ecclesiastical and administrative authority from the Macedonian to the Dacian provinces is justified in the decree in the following ways: references to Justinian’s Illyrian birthplace, in close proximity to Justiniana Prima; the recent reestablishment of imperial control at cities on both sides of the middle Danube, including Recidava, Lederata, and Viminacium; and the fact that the new capital was closer than Thessalonica to Sirmium, the traditional capital of the Illyrian prefecture prior to 441.⁶⁸ These points highlight the reality that imperial administrative authority had only recently been reasserted over the provinces of Dardania, Dacia Mediterranea, and Upper Moesia, and that Pannonia remained beyond imperial control.⁶⁹ They also make clear the symbolic importance of Sirmium to the imperial authorities during the 530s, and suggest an attempt to apply pressure on Gothic southern Pannonia from the new imperial administrative capital in Dacia Mediterranea. Indeed, novella eleven interestingly refers to the removal of Aquis in Dacia Ripensis from the authority of the *meridiano episcopo*, presumably the archbishop of Thessalonica. While Thessalonica remained a papal vicariate after 535, Justiniana Prima did not come under the authority of the papacy for another ten years. This implies that novella eleven was also an assault on the ecclesiastical authority of Gothic-held Rome in the Illyrian region.

67 “De privilegiis Archiepiscopi Primae Iustinianae,” in *Corpus Iuris Civilis: Novellae*, ed. and trans. R. Schoell and G. Kroll (Berlin, 1954), 94.

68 See Heather, *Goths and Romans* (n. 13 above), 244, and M. Mirković, “Sirmium—Its History from the First Century A.D. to 582 A.D.,” in *Sirmium*, ed. V. Popović (Belgrade, 1971), 1:33–45, on the movement of the Illyrian capital.

69 Diculesscu, *Gepiden* (n. 5 above), 123, argues that the three cities referred to were located in Pannonia and that the Romans recaptured them in April 535, following the Goths’ evacuation from the area. However, it is generally accepted that the Gothic War did not start until the summer of 535. See M. Kouroumali, “Procopius and the Gothic War” (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2005), 182. Further, I will argue that with the exception of Dalmatia, there is no evidence that the Romans reestablished control over the southern Pannonian region prior to its colonization by the Gepids and the Lombards. See pp. 25–27.

61 Croke, “Mundo the Gepid” (n. 25 above), on Mundo’s life.

62 Procopius, *Wars* 1.24.40–41.

63 Marcellinus Comes, *Chronicle*, year 530.

64 See n. 42 above.

65 Christou, *Langobarden* (n. 4 above), 65–66. See Pohl, “Langobarden” (n. 3 above), 28–29, on the first migration of the Lombards to northern Pannonia in the 520s, as opposed to the traditional view that they did not move to the region until 546.

66 See pp. 26–27.

The Roman-Gothic War in Dalmatia and Gepid Occupation of Sirmium, AD 535–540

The Roman-Gothic war of 535–36 in Dalmatia demonstrates that western Illyricum was significant not only because of logistical concerns related to the outbreak of war in Italy, but because it was an important part of Justinian's planned reconquest of the former holdings of the Western Roman Empire.⁷⁰ The Romans finally expelled the Goths from Dalmatia in 536, following a series of bloody, hard-fought battles subsequent to their initial invasion of the province in 535.⁷¹ The significance of these events is overshadowed by Procopius's preoccupation in the *Wars* with Belisarius's invasion of southern Italy in 535, understandable since Procopius participated in that campaign.⁷² Secondary works have tended to follow Procopius and pay less attention to the Dalmatian campaign.⁷³ Nonetheless, the war was important to both Goths and Romans, as is clear even from the scanty information Procopius includes in the *Wars*. First, it is significant that Justinian sent the field army of Illyricum, under its commander, Mundo, to invade Dalmatia prior to dispatching Belisarius's naval invasion of southern Italy. Second, the Goths appear to have put up much greater resistance to the Romans in Dalmatia than they did in southern Italy, where Belisarius's progress in the field was barely contested.⁷⁴ For instance, after Mundo had captured Salona, capital of Dalmatia, the Gothic leader Theodatus sent a massive army commanded by the generals Gripas and Asinarius to attack his forces (fig. 1). This army inflicted a crushing defeat on an imperial scouting party, killing its leader, Mauricius, son of Mundo. The subsequent battle was eventually won by the Romans, but at a great cost, with many casualties on both sides, including the general Mundo. The Roman army retreated, leaving the

remnants of the Gothic army to occupy settlements in the vicinity of Salona.

In 536, Justinian again sent the Illyrian field army to invade Dalmatia, this time commanded by Constantianus, an imperial groom.⁷⁵ Rather than invading overland, Constantianus gathered his forces at Dyrrachium, in Epirus Nova, and proceeded by sea to the Dalmatian coast and Salona. By this point, the Gothic commander Gripas had evacuated the city, having received exaggerated reports of the size of the approaching imperial army. Constantianus entered the city, and shortly afterward the Goths departed for Ravenna.

The death of Mundo and departure of the Goths had removed the two major obstacles facing Gepid expansion into Pannonia.⁷⁶ Procopius states that the Gepids took possession of Sirmium as soon as the Goths had departed.⁷⁷ This must have occurred no earlier than the Gothic evacuation of Dalmatia in 536. Procopius does not suggest that the Romans captured Sirmium prior to the Gepids' occupation of the city, as has sometimes been argued by historians.⁷⁸ Given their heavy military involvement in Dalmatia, this would have been unlikely.⁷⁹ The notion that the Goths relinquished Pannonia Sirmiensis to the Gepids in an attempt to deny the Romans complete control over the Pannonian region is more plausible.⁸⁰

Indeed, despite his earlier anti-Gothic alliance with the Gepids of King Elemundus, Justinian was angered by this development, and as a result ceased tributary payments to the Gepids and attacked them in 538. An entry in the chronicle of Marcellinus Comes for this year relates that "Calluc, Master of Soldiery, fought at first successfully and later unsuccessfully against the Gepids and was killed."⁸¹ Calluc, Mundo's successor as *magister militum per Illyricum*, had quite

70 See n. 3 above.

71 See Procopius, *Wars* 5.5.2, 5.7.1–10, 5.7.26–36, on the Roman campaigns in Dalmatia.

72 See Kouroumali, "Procopius and the Gothic War," 210–18, on the reasons for Procopius's selective coverage of the Gothic War.

73 For instance, Evans, *Age of Justinian*, 136–51, follows Procopius's coverage very closely, focusing on Belisarius's expedition. Similarly, see Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, 275–77 (both n. 1 above).

74 Procopius, *Wars* 5.11.1: "The Goths who were at Rome and in the country around had even before this regarded with great amazement the inactivity of Theodatus, because, though the enemy was in his neighbourhood, he was unwilling to engage them in battle."

75 Procopius, *Wars* 5.7.26–36.

76 Wozniak, "Byzantine Diplomacy" (n. 2 above), 146–47. See Stein, *Bas-Empire* (n. 1 above), 308–9, on the important role played by Mundo in keeping the Gepids in check between 529 and 536.

77 Procopius, *Wars* 7.33.8.

78 Christou, *Langobarden* (n. 4 above), 69, argues that the Gepids moved into Sirmium either after the departure of the Romans from Sirmium, or after the death of Mundo. Similarly, see Diclescu, *Gepiden* (n. 5 above), 123–25.

79 Stein, *Bas-Empire*, 309, argues that the Illyrian field army was unable to defend Sirmium due to its involvement elsewhere.

80 Diclesu, *Gepiden*, 124–25.

81 Marcellinus Comes, *Chronicle*, year 538.

understandably been sent to repulse the Gepids' raid on Dacia, which, as Procopius records, took place after their move to Sirmium.⁸² Justinian's long-term objective may have been to gain possession of Sirmium.

The significance of the imperial military campaigns against Goths and Gepids in western Illyricum during the 530s is reinforced by an interesting passage at the end of Jordanes' *Romana*, which was composed in the early 550s.⁸³ It states that the military defeats suffered by the Roman generals Calluc and Mundo were comparable in their gravity to the Gepid-Lombard battle of 552. Although Jordanes does not elaborate on this suggestion, the disastrous defeats and deaths of these generals allowed the Gepids and the Lombards to dominate the Pannonian region, filling a vacuum left by the Goths and laying the foundations for their later rivalry.

Following the death of Mundo and Calluc's failed military campaign, it seems that Justinian resigned himself to controlling the area indirectly by way of alliances with the Germanic groups. By 539, he had formed an alliance with the Lombards of King Wacho. According to Procopius, in this year the Gothic leader Wittigis asked Wacho for help against the Romans, but the latter refused, citing his treaty with the Empire.⁸⁴ It is generally argued that this treaty was a prelude to another agreement, arranged in 546 or 547, in which Justinian bestowed lands in southern Pannonia upon the Lombards.⁸⁵ This hypothesis is based largely on Paul the Deacon's testimony that Audoin led the Lombards into Pannonia soon after his accession, and that battle commenced with the Gepids not long after.⁸⁶ However, Paul's history refers on another occasion to the Lombards' migration to Pannonia as having been forty-two years prior to their migration to Italy in 568.

These internal contradictions reflect the source's reliance upon a multitude of historical traditions, many of them oral, and its compilation more than two centuries after the events it describes.⁸⁷ This means that its chronological indicators are not irrefutable. Procopius's reference to Justinian's Lombard treaty in a passage on the occupation of the Western Roman Empire by barbarian groups in the 548–49 section of his *Gothic Wars* (prior to the beginning of the first Gepid-Lombard war in 548) also bolsters the perception that this "final" Roman-Lombard agreement was reached not long before, in 546 or 547.⁸⁸ However, Procopius's passage on the geopolitical settlement of Franks, Gepids, Lombards, and Heruls sets the scene for his ensuing narrative on Pannonian affairs in the late 540s and early 550s by summarizing developments between the start of the Gothic War and early 548. He is not solely referring to events that had taken place shortly before 548.

It seems more likely that, like the Gepids, the Lombards strengthened their territorial base during a scramble for the Pannonian territories of the Goths following 536. According to Procopius, their new holdings were located beyond the Gepids and included "the city of Noricum and the strongholds of Pannonia."⁸⁹ This vague testimony probably denotes an area centered upon Pannonia Savia, which bordered the Gepids' territory in Pannonia Sirmiensis (figs. 1, 3).⁹⁰ Scholars have tried to associate a "city of Noricum" with various southern Pannonian urban settlements, but no city with this name has been securely identified.⁹¹ Maybe Procopius means part of the former region of Noricum Mediterraneum. After all, this was adjacent to Pannonia Savia.⁹² It is unlikely that

82 Procopius, *Wars* 7.33.8–9, Diclescu, *Gepiden*, 129–30, and Christou, *Langobarden*, 72–73, suggest that the Gepids occupied Roman lands in the attack—Aurelian Dacia according to Diclescu.

83 Jordanes, *Iordanis Romana et Getica*, ed. T. Mommsen (Berlin, 1961), 52.

84 Procopius, *Wars* 6.22.11–12.

85 For a 546 date, see Diclescu, *Gepiden*, 134, Stein, *Bas-Empire*, 528, Christie, *Lombards* (n. 4 above), 35, and Schmidt, *Ostgermanen* (n. 4 above), 580. For a 545–46 date, see Wozniak, "Byzantine Diplomacy" (n. 2 above), 148. For a 547–48 date, see Werner, *Langobarden* (n. 4 above), 140. For a date anytime after 543, see Pohl, "Empire and the Lombards" (n. 3 above), 89.

86 Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, ed. E. Peters, trans. W. D. Foulke (Philadelphia, 1974), 1, 22–23.

87 Ibid., pp. vii–xvi and introduction by E. Peters; W. Pohl, "Paulus Diaconus und die *Historia Langobardum*: Text und Tradition," in *Historiographie im Frühen Mittelalter*, ed. A. Scharer and G. Scheibelreiter (Vienna, 1994), 375–405.

88 Procopius, *Wars* 7.33.10.

89 Ibid. 7.33.10.

90 Christou, *Langobarden*, 79–80, and Pohl, "Langobarden" (n. 3 above), 29, discuss more precisely the possible location(s) of the Lombards. See Christie, "Survival of Roman Settlement along the Middle Danube" (n. 19 above), 329–33, on the fortresses possibly occupied by the Lombards and the nature of their settlement.

91 R. Egger, "Civitas Noricum," *WSSt* 47 (1929): 146–54; Christou, *Langobarden*, 79; Wolfram, *Die Geburt Mitteleuropas: Geschichte Österreichs vor seiner Entstehung 378–907* (Vienna, 1987), 80.

92 Pohl, "Langobarden," 29.

the Lombards would have waited a decade to capitalize on the Goths' evacuation of these territories, especially when the Gepids wasted no time moving into Pannonia Sirmiensis, and the Romans into Dalmatia. Further, the Lombards' occupation of lands in southern Pannonia by 539 would explain the Gothic leader Wittigis's desire to form an alliance with them. From this position they could potentially prevent the arrival of Roman reinforcements in Italy, and at the same time threaten the Roman Balkans. If the Lombards had still been based in northern Pannonia, they would not have been considered such valuable allies.

Procopius's reference to the "donation" of Justinian has been taken literally by some scholars, who assume that the Romans had previously regained control over Noricum and southern Pannonia and then bestowed them upon the Lombards.⁹³ While archaeological evidence suggests that Roman populations were still inhabiting the southern Pannonian regions, and that a certain degree of economic prosperity was obtained there, the precise nature of their administrative organization in this period remains obscure.⁹⁴ Centralized imperial control over the region had ceased during the fourth and fifth centuries and there is no indication in Procopius's work that it was restored during the reign of Justinian.⁹⁵ Indeed, with the exception of the regions around Singidunum, settled by the Herul federates, all the regions mentioned by Procopius in his lament of the loss of the West had been captured by barbarian peoples since the outbreak of the Gothic War:

Gaul by the Franks, Pannonia Sirmiensis by the Gepids, and Pannonia Savia and Noricum Mediterraneum by the Lombards. Therefore, rather than actually relinquishing authority over this area, Justinian's donation was probably just an imperial recognition of Lombard territorial acquisitions, granted at the same time as the Roman-Lombard alliance. Further, rather than a *foedus*, according to which a barbarian tribe was settled on imperial soil in return for military service, the Roman-Lombard alliance was undoubtedly a *symmachikon*—a mutual military alliance.⁹⁶

Justinian's willingness to support the Lombards in their acquisition of Pannonian territories was at least partly motivated by a desire to counterbalance the Gepids' sudden annexation of Pannonia Sirmiensis. However, prior to the Gepid-Lombard disputes of the late 540s, Justinian also reinstituted his alliance with the Gepid king, Elemundus. Procopius's narrative on these disputes makes clear that by 548, the Gepids received tributary payments from the Romans, and were considered to be Roman *symmachoi* by the Lombard and Gepid envoys in Constantinople in the same year.⁹⁷ The Gepid-Roman alliance was probably arranged shortly after Calluc's defeat in 538. Along with the Herul allies settled by Justinian in lands around Singidunum since 528, the Gepids and the Lombards constituted a three-tiered Roman client state system, spanning a swathe of land between Upper Moesia and Noricum Mediterraneum (figs. 1, 3).

The Growth of Gepid Power under King Thorisin and Conflicts with the Romans and the Lombards, AD 545–552

The favorable balance of power created by this series of alliances did not last. Between 548 and 552, a series of Gepid-Lombard diplomatic disputes and military tensions destabilized the political situation in Pannonia. Procopius, writing shortly after these events, in 551

93 Christou, *Langobarden*, 80–81, contends that this was a typical example of a federate settlement, in which the Romans donated the rural areas of southern Pannonia and certain small cities/fortresses, while retaining control of the majority of its cities and major routes. Pohl, "Empire and the Lombards" (n. 3 above), 89, assumes that the Romans would not have given away the province of Pannonia Savia prior to 543.

94 See Christie, "Survival of Roman Settlement," 336–37, on the difficulty of interpreting the archaeological evidence and coming to conclusions regarding the socioeconomic organization and settlement patterns of the Pannonian area in the early medieval period. See Pohl, "Langobarden," 29, and Christou, *Langobarden*, 81–82, on the continued prosperity of certain Pannonian areas and the survival of forts, especially in areas such as Pannonia Savia.

95 See J. W. Eadie, "City and Countryside in Late Roman Pannonia: The *Regio Sirmiensis*," in *City, Town, and Countryside in the Early Byzantine Era*, ed. R. L. Hohlfelder (New York, 1982), 25–29, on the gradual loss of imperial control over southern Pannonia.

96 Procopius, *Wars* 6.22.12. See Pohl, "Empire and the Lombards," 78–87, on the differences between the various types of Roman-barbarian and inter-barbarian agreement.

97 Procopius, *Wars* 7.34.18, 31, and 39. In the words of a Lombard envoy at Constantinople in 548, the Gepids had been receiving *syntaxeis* from the Romans "for we do not know how long a time." The speech of a Gepid envoy at the same time mentions the Roman-Gepid *symmachikon* and refers to the Gepids as *enspondous*.

and 553, considered them sufficiently important to digress from books 7 and 8 of his Gothic wars narrative to describe them.⁹⁸ His attention is especially significant considering his meager coverage of Balkan and Pannonian affairs in earlier books. Procopius's text offers no specific explanations for the ongoing Gepid-Lombard disputes. For instance, regarding the first episode of 549, he merely states that both sides were eager to battle, without explaining their eventual decision to back down and establish a truce.⁹⁹ Similarly, in discussing the second crisis of 550, he refers vaguely to "differences" without outlining what these were.¹⁰⁰ He relates that in the same year the Gepids and the Lombards had drawn up their forces in preparation for battle, only for both sides to withdraw when panic inexplicably spread through their ranks.¹⁰¹ Therefore, all that may be inferred from a cursory reading of Procopius is that the Gepid-Lombard conflicts represented the competition of two evenly matched

Germanic groups for control of Pannonia and imperial support.

Modern historians have provided a variety of explanations for the Gepid-Lombard war, one being competition for land.¹⁰² This is based on the dating to 546 or 547 of the Lombard migration to regions adjacent to the Gepids, and Procopius's indefinite reference to regional competition as a cause of the war: "The Gepids and the Lombards, having come to be neighbours, became exceedingly hostile toward one another."¹⁰³ However, Procopius's failure to include a temporal reference means that he could easily be referring to the earlier movement of the Lombards. Although geopolitical competition was undoubtedly one of the root causes of the conflict, if the Lombards had migrated to southern Pannonia in the late 530s, as I argue, it would not explain why the war broke out ten years later. Another common explanation claims that the war resulted from the decision of the Gepid and Lombard kings, Thorisin and Audoin, to shelter exiles and rivals to one another's thrones—Ildiges and Ustrigothus, respectively.¹⁰⁴ Although the presence of these defectors in rival camps must have exacerbated tensions, Procopius writes that both men moved only subsequent to the outbreak of hostilities.¹⁰⁵

Because Procopius's passages on the Gepid-Lombard wars are embedded in his narrative on the Gothic wars, they have often been interpreted in the context of the Italian war.¹⁰⁶ While the Gothic War undoubtedly heightened the logistical importance of the Pannonian provinces, their relationship to the Balkans was also crucial. This is easy to ignore in light of Procopius's cursory treatment of Balkan affairs and negative portrayal of Justinian's policies there, more openly brought out in the *Anecdota*.¹⁰⁷ However, as is

98 Ibid. 7.33.7–34.47, 35.12–22, and 8.18.1–19.22, 25.1–15, and 27.1–29. On the dating of Procopius's works, see G. Greatrex, "The Dates of Procopius' Works," *BMGS* 18 (1994): 101–14; Cameron, *Procopius* (n. 1 above), 9; and J. Howard-Johnston, "The Education and Expertise of Procopius," *Antiquité Tardive* 8 (2000): 19–30.

99 Procopius, *Wars* 7.34.1. The dating of the Gepid-Lombard wars by Stein, *Bas-Empire*, 531–35; Pohl, "Langobarden," 30–34, and "Empire and the Lombards," 90–91 (both n. 3 above), and Wozniak, "Byzantine Diplomacy" (n. 2 above), 150–51, is to be preferred to that of Schmidt, *Ostgermanen*, 537; Christou, *Langobarden*, 91; Werner, *Langobarden*, 8–9 (all n. 4 above), and Dicușescu, *Gepiden*, 139–42. The former group dates the first Gepid-Lombard war to 549, the second to 550, and the third to 552—the year of Narses' expedition to Italy. This correlates with Procopius's dating system, which places the first dispute in the 14th year of the Gothic War (548–49), the second at the start of the 16th year (550–51), and the third toward the end of the 17th year (551–52). The latter group of scholars contend that the three events took place in 547, 549, and 551. Dicușescu argues for this earlier dating on the basis that the Lombard exile, Ildiges, who left for Italy following the first episode, fought in Italy against the Romans in the 14th year of the Gothic War. However, Procopius's excursus on Ildiges is located in the 14th year because it centers on Ildiges' alliance with the Gepids following their dispute with the Lombards and subsequent departure. This does not mean that Procopius's coverage of his earlier defection from the Lombards (in the early 540s) or later service in the Gothic wars in the same passage should also be dated to the 14th year of the war. The principal arguments for an earlier dating relate to the date of the final Gepid-Lombard military encounter, on which see pp. 36–37 of this article.

100 Procopius, *Wars* 8.18.1.

101 See *ibid.* 8.18.4–11, on the diplomatic dispute and near military encounter of 550.

102 Christou, *Langobarden*, 84.

103 Procopius, *Wars* 7.34.1.

104 Schmidt, *Ostgermanen* (n. 4 above), 581; Pohl, "Gepiden," 299; Dicușescu, *Gepiden*, 136–37 (both n. 5 above); Wozniak, "Byzantine Diplomacy" (n. 2 above), 148–49.

105 Procopius, *Wars* 7.35.19: "When the war broke out between the Gepids and the Lombards, Ildiges went straight to the Gepids," and 8.27.20: "The boy (Ustrigothus) departed from his land and made off to the Lombards, who were then at war with the Gepids."

106 See n. 3 above.

107 Procopius, in *Anecdota* 11.3–11, displays his distaste for what he considers to be the appeasement of barbarian groups, blames repeated barbarian raids on Justinian's payment of tribute, and

often the case with such texts, it is necessary to identify and look beyond the biases of their authors, and home in on elements of their narrative, the importance of which the authors may have suppressed. There are a number of possible reasons for Procopius's brief coverage of the Balkans. His lack of experience in the region may have had a strong effect—a factor that may also explain his comparatively pessimistic outlook on the later stages of the Gothic and Persian wars after his departure from these arenas.¹⁰⁸ The Balkans also represented poor subject matter for the classicizing genre within which Procopius wrote. Many Balkan military encounters consisted not of set-piece, pitched battles, but irregular guerrilla operations in inhospitable terrain—especially where Sklaveni groups were involved.¹⁰⁹ Further, carrot-and-stick and divide-and-rule diplomatic dealings with barbarian peoples did not adhere to the values of trust, honor, and loyalty, evident in the historian's handling of negotiations between generals or leaders in the Persian and Gothic wars.¹¹⁰ Procopius gives the impression that the barbarians could and should not be trusted, and responded only to military force. However, if we inspect more closely Procopius's narrative on the Gepid-Lombard disputes, consider the content of other Balkan passages that he does not overtly link to these affairs, and keep in mind Justinian's military responses to the crises that are mentioned but not highlighted by Procopius, it becomes clear that the Gepid kingdom of Thorisin represented the main cause of regional

instability, and that Justinian's Pannonian policy in the 540s and early 550s was conceived with the Gepids in mind.

The pair of speeches placed by Procopius in the mouths of Gepid and Lombard envoys at Constantinople in 548 reflect ongoing Roman hostility to the Gepids' occupation of Sirmium twelve years after the event, and anxiety at their increasing power.¹¹¹ According to Procopius, these emissaries requested Roman support in the dispute that had arisen between their peoples. He relates that, having pondered their arguments, Justinian decided to support the Lombards. This vaguely suggests that Justinian was responding ad hoc to the two speeches, reinforcing an impression given in the *Anecdota* that his dealings with barbarians were irrational and treacherous. Some scholars have taken the content of the Gepid and Lombard speeches literally, and argue that Justinian supported the Lombards because their speech was more persuasive than that of the Gepids.¹¹² However, such speeches should be viewed as a classicizing literary ploy through which Procopius indirectly comments upon his subject matter.¹¹³ They presumably reflect the perspective of a significant section of the Roman diplomatic and military circles he frequented and for whom he wrote. Pohl interprets the speeches' critical assessments of Justinian's Balkan policy as evidence that the barbarians were manipulating imperial power to a greater extent than vice versa.¹¹⁴ However, this impression owes much to Procopius's disapproval of Justinian's conciliation of barbarian groups, and ignores the fact that, despite having settled southern Pannonia independently, the Germanic kingdoms were clearly still reliant upon imperial support to resolve their disputes.

disapproves of the emperor's treacherous policy of inciting inter-barbarian wars.

108 With the exception of a return journey from Italy in 540, there is no indication that Procopius visited the peninsula long enough to encourage him to pay closer attention to the area in his text. On this journey, see O. Karagiorgou, "Urbanism and Economy in Late Antique Thessaly (3rd–7th century AD): The Archaeological Evidence" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2001), 143–50. On Procopius's more pessimistic outlook on the later wars, see Cameron, *Procopius* (n. 1 above), 150–51 and ch. 13.

109 *Maurice's Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy*, trans. G. T. Dennis (Philadelphia, 1984), 11.4, repeatedly admonishes Roman soldiers to guard against Slav ambushes. Theophylact Simocatta, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta*, trans. Whitby and Whitby, 7.5.1–5, describes an ambush of Peter's soldiers by Sklaveni after the former attempted to cross a river during his campaign of 595. See Mi. Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian* (Oxford, 1988), 80–83 on Slavs' military characteristics.

110 See n. 107 above.

111 See Procopius, *Wars* 7.34.6–39, on Gepid and Lombard speeches. Bóna, "Langobarden in Ungarn" (n. 4 above), 237, highlights the importance of Sirmium to imperial policy.

112 See, for instance, Wozniak, "Byzantine Diplomacy" (n. 2 above), 149, and Christou, *Langobarden* (n. 4 above), 88.

113 R. Scott, "The Classical Tradition in Byzantine Historiography," in *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition*, ed. M. Mullett and R. Scott (Birmingham, 1981), 61–74.

114 Pohl, "Empire and the Lombards" (n. 3 above), 93: "We get the impression that this concept of *xymmachia* is quite compatible with relationships between independent states (and not only between the Empire and dependent states)," and "Langobarden" (n. 3 above), 30: "Das rednerische Kabinetstück dient im Text dazu, die Rolle des Kaisers als Schiedsrichter der Völker hervorstreichen und zugleich in Frage zu stellen."

The speeches reveal an inherent distrust of the Gepids by portraying them as the more powerful, aggressive, and dangerous of the two Germanic kingdoms.¹¹⁵ The Lombard speech, which is by far the longer of the two, is founded on moralistic themes such as honor, trust, and loyalty, to criticize the Gepids' treacherous annexation of Sirmium.¹¹⁶ The Gepid speech also focuses on the issue of Sirmium, portraying it as an act inspired by the Gepids' confidence in Roman friendship and a belief in the emperor's eventual acquiescence.¹¹⁷ In other words, it equates Gepid treachery with an audacity inspired by the tributary payments they received from Justinian. Therefore, both speeches make clear that the Gepids were the stronger of the two Germanic powers, the greatest threat to regional stability, and the principal aggressors.

Although the emergence of a Gepid threat has been acknowledged by secondary works, it has not been placed at the center of their arguments.¹¹⁸ This is partly because these works have not considered in detail the source of the Gepids' increasing power during the 540s. This becomes clear elsewhere in Procopius's text in passages on the Herul rebellion of the mid-540s, the defection of the warlord Ildiges from the Lombards, and Slavic and Hunnic raids on the Balkans. These expansionist measures demonstrate that the Gepids took advantage of the Romans' preoccupation with crises elsewhere to significantly bolster their military resources during the 540s. The buildup of power coincided with the rise of the Gepid leader and future king, Thorisin. Procopius informs us that Thorisin cast aside Ustrigothus, son of Elemundus, forcing him to seek refuge with the Lombards shortly after the outbreak of the Gepid-Lombard war, which

began in 548.¹¹⁹ We may assume that, like Audoin, king of the Lombards from 546, Thorisin had been a regent for Ustrigothus in the years before he usurped the Gepid throne.

Thorisin's first significant diplomatic coup resulted from the political disintegration of the Romans' Herul federates, which, according to Procopius, occurred "not long before" the Gepid-Lombard dispute of 548–549.¹²⁰ Stationed in the vicinity of Singidunum in Upper Moesia, the Heruls had protected eastern Illyricum from barbarian raids and provided an invaluable source of manpower for imperial campaigns in Italy, Africa, and the East.¹²¹ The defection to the Gepids of the anti-Roman Herul leader, Datius, his brother Aordus, and their men seems to have resulted from a power struggle with a Roman puppet ruler, Suartas.¹²² Procopius records that in 549 three thousand Heruls under their general Aordus arrayed themselves alongside the Gepids against the Roman-Lombard alliance, while one thousand five hundred fought for the imperial army.¹²³ The latter group, commanded by a certain Philemuth, was presumably loyal to Suartas. The Gepids may have encouraged the Heruls to cast off Roman political influence and join their army in Pannonia.¹²⁴ This weakened Justinian's grip on Upper Moesia and strengthened the Gepid's military resources. Whatever the case, the disintegration of the Herul federates in the middle Danube region represented a major blow to the security of the Illyrian provinces.

The Gepid army was also bolstered by the followers of the Lombard warlord Ildiges, who, together with his father Risiulfus, had been exiled from the Lombard kingdom by King Wacho as the result of a succession dispute during the early 540s.¹²⁵ Ildiges responded to

115 For instance, Procopius, *Wars* 7.34.3: "The Lombards, thinking that they alone by their own strength would never be a match for the Gepids (for they were, in fact, outnumbered by their enemy)"; and 7.34.28: "The Gepids are far superior to the Lombards in multitude and in valor."

116 Ibid. 7.34.6–24.

117 Ibid. 7.34.25.

118 For example, Wozniak, "Byzantine Diplomacy," 148–49, refers to the Gepids' strength in comparison to the Lombards and their possession of Sirmium, but considers the immediate origins of the war to be the decision of both sides to shelter rivals to one another's thrones. Pohl, "The Empire and the Lombards," 88, 91, refers to the Gepids' annexation of Sirmium and raids on the Empire, but focuses upon the strategic importance of southern Pannonia to the Gothic War.

119 Procopius, *Wars* 8.27.19–20.

120 Ibid. 7.34.43.

121 See ibid. 7.33.13, on the location of the Heruls.

122 Ibid. 6.14.37–42 and 15.29–36.

123 Ibid. 7.34.42–43.

124 As is suggested by Diculesscu, *Gepiden* (n. 5 above), 132.

125 Probably at some point between 539, when Procopius, *Wars* 6.22.12, last mentions Wacho, and 546, when Audoin acceded to the Lombard throne.

the breakdown of Gepid-Lombard relations in 548 by joining forces with the Gepids, who promised to raise him to the Lombard throne.¹²⁶ Procopius relates that Ildiges brought with him both Sklaveni and Lombard followers. When Ildiges subsequently served the Gothic king Totila in Italy, defeating a Roman force commanded by Lazarus in Venetia, he was accompanied by six thousand Sklaveni.¹²⁷ It is, therefore, apparent that he had acquired dominance over a significant group of Sklaveni tribes. Along with the Herul defectors, Ildiges' followers augmented Gepid military resources by nearly ten thousand men, decisively skewing the regional balance of power in their favor. Had the Gepids at this point also vanquished and absorbed the Lombards, they might have achieved the sort of domination in Pannonia that was later enjoyed by the Avar Khaganate.

Ildiges' movements between the late 530s and the early 550s illustrate the politically fragmented and confused nature of the Pannonian region following the departure of the Goths in 536. Inter- and intra-barbarian disputes resulted in the rise of warlords commanding manpower resources commensurate with entire barbarian tribal federations. The mercenary behavior of Ildiges recalls Mundo the Gepid, who similarly exploited an era characterized by intense geopolitical competition to secure a series of lucrative political alliances in the upper and middle Danube areas in the early sixth century.¹²⁸ As a result, one of the keys to political and military success in these areas, both for the barbarian kingdoms and the imperial authorities, was the ability to win over and manipulate warlords and their armies.

The Gepids' increased power and status in the middle Danube region during the 540s is indicative of their diplomatic success. Their Germanic and Arian Christian identities could have attracted the Heruls to their banner. In the speech attributed to the Lombard envoy in 548, Procopius contrasts the orthodoxy of the Lombards with the Arian Christianity of the Gepids.¹²⁹ During their later conquest and settlement of northern Italy after 568, the Lombards

would champion the Arian faith and confront the Catholic Church.¹³⁰ Twenty years earlier, however, when it was in their interest to define themselves in opposition to the Gepids, they proclaimed their orthodoxy at the imperial court. The Gepids seem to have represented the principal Arian kingdom north of the Danube. This may have had something to do with their possession of Pannonia Sirmiensis, which had been a hotbed of Arian Christianity while under Roman control in the fourth century, and had been held by Germanic Arian groups since 441.¹³¹ These factors explain the attraction of the Gepid kingdom for the anti-Roman Heruls, who presumably objected to Justinian's attempts at converting them because they were Arian Christians. Their rebellion mirrors that of their fellow Heruls who had participated in the mutiny of Arian Christian barbarians in Africa during the 530s.¹³²

The main reason the Gepid kingdom of King Thorisin had become an important concern to Justinian by the late 540s and early 550s was its naval control of stretches of the middle Danube, Sava, and Drava rivers: The Romans had relinquished control of the middle Danube by the mid-fifth century. That this was still the case in the mid-sixth century is shown by book four of Procopius's *Buildings*, which starts its sweeping survey of Justinian's Danubian fortifications at Singidunum before moving eastward.¹³³ By adding Pannonia Sirmiensis to their Dacian territories east of the Tisza River, the Gepids gained control of the river crossings between their two territorial bases, beyond the limits of Roman naval authority. This enabled them to escort Sklaveni and Kutrigur Hun raiders, coming from areas east of the Carpathians, across their Dacian and Pannonian lands, and ferry them into and out of the Balkan provinces.

Although historians have recognized this development, they have not related it to the proliferation of devastating Slav and Hun raids on the Balkan provinces

126 Procopius, *Wars* 7.35.19.

127 Ibid. 7.35.22.

128 See pp. 19–20.

129 Procopius, *Wars* 7.34.24.

130 Bóna, *Dawn of the Dark Ages* (n. 4 above), 87.

131 A. Mócsy, *The Provinces of the Roman Empire: Pannonia and Upper Moesia* (London, 1974), 329–33.

132 Procopius, *Wars* 4.14.12.

133 Procopius, *The Buildings*, trans. H. B. Dewing (London–Cambridge, 1918), 4.5.12.

in the late 540s and early 550s.¹³⁴ This may be because Procopius mentions only three occasions when the Gepids operated their “ferry service.” Following another dispute with the Lombards in 550, the Gepids, fearing the Roman-Lombard alliance, pre-emptively concluded a military agreement with the Kutrigur Huns.¹³⁵ When the alliance failed to materialize, the Gepids grew embarrassed at the presence of the Kutrigurs, and ferried twelve thousand of them into Illyricum with their leader Chinialon. Even though the Kutrigurs manipulated Gepid support to achieve their goals, it was the Gepids who initiated this series of events. Their ability to form an alliance with a Hunnic group inhabiting a region as far away as the Sea of Azov and then direct it against the Roman Empire when circumstances dictated gives us another indication of the Gepids’ growing authority within the barbarian world north of the Danube.

In the same year, the Gepids twice assisted Sklaveni raids on the Balkans. They ferried out of the Balkans a Sklaveni group that had ravaged Illyricum, apparently charging them two gold pieces per head.¹³⁶ This indicates that they did not operate their ferry service merely to apply pressure on the Roman Empire, but to profit from the Slav and Hun raids by taxing the ill-gotten gains of the raiders upon their departure from the Illyrian provinces. Later that year, the Gepids transported another Sklaveni raiding party into the Balkans. Procopius briefly suggests that the Gothic king Totila had also been suspected in some quarters of playing a part in inciting the Sklaveni raids of this period.¹³⁷

134 For instance, Diculescu, *Gepiden*, 137–43, discusses the importance of the Gepids’ possession of Sirmium and threat to the Balkans, but does not associate them with increasing barbarian raids on the Balkans. Stein, *Bas-Empire* (n. 1 above), 525, argues that the Slav and Hun invasions added to problems faced by the empire, including those involving the Germanic groups of the Danube region. Pohl, “Empire and the Lombards,” 93, and Christou, *Langobarden* (n. 4 above), 93, interpret the Gepids’ transportation of Sklaveni in 551 as above all a ploy to apply pressure on the Roman Empire to agree to a treaty with them.

135 See Procopius, *Wars* 8.18.12–18, on the Gepid-Kutrigur alliance.

136 Ibid. 8.25.5–6 and 10. Procopius’s text states that the Gepids ferried a group of Sklaveni back across the Danube, encouraging Justinian to sign a treaty with them, and then did this again subsequent to the treaty, providing Justinian with the excuse he needed to support the Lombards in their attack of 552.

137 Ibid. 7.40.31–32.

This idea of Gepid-Gothic collusion is clearly based on rumor and must, therefore, remain speculative.

Although these are the only three instances in which Procopius mentions Gepid boats being used to aid barbarian invasions of the Balkan provinces, it was surely no coincidence that Sklaveni and Kutrigur raids proliferated between 548 and 551, the years of Gepid-Roman hostility, and ceased following Justinian’s resolution of the Gepid crisis in 552. Further, the majority of these raids seem to have entered the western Balkan provinces of Illyricum, and not the eastern Balkan Thracian provinces, as would be expected if they had been made possible by Gepid naval power.¹³⁸

The vulnerability of the interior Balkan provinces to attack from the Sava, Drava, and middle Danube area must have been a source of grave concern to the imperial authorities after the region passed out of their control in the mid-fifth century. This vulnerability is highlighted by Procopius in his discussion of the Kutrigur Hun invasion of 551. He claims that the Kutrigurs took advantage of the Gepids’ help in crossing the Danube where it flowed through their land principally because the lower and middle reaches of the Danube frontier—from the mouth of the Black Sea to Singidunum—were too well defended by the Romans to be easily crossed.¹³⁹ In other words, Pannonia Sirmiensis, the area controlled by the Gepids, was the Achilles’ heel in the Balkan defensive system of Anastasius and Justinian. From this region, barbarian raiders could circumvent the fortifications and military contingents of the Danube frontier regions, and gain access to Upper Moesia, longitudinal routes into the southern Illyrian provinces, and the Balkan military highway to the Thracian plain and Constantinople. The Gepids’ designs on Pannonia can be explained in the same way. By regaining their former territory around Sirmium in 536, they could apply greater pressure on

138 The attack by the Sklaveni in 548 affected Illyricum and reached as far south as Dyrrachium (Procopius, *Wars* 7.29.1–3), and that of 550 was initially encountered by scouts of Germanus, who was recruiting an army to fight in Italy at Serdica, capital of Dacia Mediterranea (ibid. 7.40.1–8). Having been deterred from following longitudinal routes south toward the Macedonian plain and Thessalonica, the same Sklaveni traversed the Dinaric mountain chain and wintered in Dalmatia, before returning to raid Illyricum and Thrace in 551 (ibid. 7.40.31–45). The second Sklaveni raid of 551 affected only Illyricum (ibid. 8.25.1–6). The Kutrigur Hun raid, as has been discussed, entered Illyricum via the Gepids’ land.

139 Ibid. 8.18.16–17.

the Roman Empire to grant them financial and political privileges in return for protecting the Danube frontier.

There is no doubt that the Slavic and Hunnic raids unleashed upon the Balkans by the Gepids disrupted Roman recruitment drives for a new Italian campaign. For instance, Germanus's recruitment campaign at Serdica was sidetracked by an invasion of northern Illyricum by the Sklaveni in 550.¹⁴⁰ Similarly, Narses' journey to Salona in 551 to join John, the nephew of Vitalian, and the Roman expeditionary force destined to invade Italy was held up at Philippopolis by a group of Huns, presumably the Kutrigurs, who were blocking the military highway toward Illyricum, to the east of it.¹⁴¹ However, Procopius makes it obvious that the defense of the Balkans was the chief priority. He asserts that in 550 Justinian ordered Germanus to postpone his recruitment campaign in Dacia Mediterranea in order to counter the Sklaveni, who were threatening an incursion into the interior Illyrian provinces of Macedonia. Further, Procopius devotes more space to discussing the grave effects of such attacks on the Balkan provinces and their populations than he does to explaining their impact on the preparations for a new Gothic war.¹⁴²

Since the Gepids had increased their military power and were exploiting their control of Sirmium and invasion routes into Illyricum, it is not surprising that Justinian repeatedly favored the Lombards in their disputes with the Gepids, and was willing to devote significant military resources to their cause. The size of the Roman forces and the number of high-ranking commanders sent against the Gepids in 549 and 552 confirm that Justinian's decision to support the Lombards was not an ad hoc response to two speeches, but was part of a long-term strategy to prevent the emergence of a Gepid superpower. Justinian had failed to achieve this goal by constraining the Gepids within a system of military alliances, and therefore he adopted a more aggressive approach. In 549, he dispatched a force of more than ten thousand cavalymen commanded by the generals Aratius, Constantianus, and Buzes and accompanied by one thousand five hundred Heruls led

by Philemuth, and he also sent a force led by John, the nephew of Vitalian—presumably the fifteen-thousand-strong Illyrian field army that had been sent against the Sklaveni a year earlier.¹⁴³ The importance of their mission is obvious, given that they commanded at least six times the number of men that were sent with Belisarius to Italy in 544, and at least three times more than Dagisthaeus's expeditionary force to Lazica in 548.¹⁴⁴ The status of the generals is also striking; Buzes had been *magister militum per Orientem* in 540, and John was *magister militum per Illyricum*.¹⁴⁵ Further, both Buzes and Constantianus were influential figures at court, having recently defended Germanus from charges that he had participated in Artabanes' rebellion in 548.¹⁴⁶

One year later, the Roman forces helped inflict a crushing defeat on the Gepids' Herul allies, killing large numbers of them, including their leader Aordus. Procopius portrays the Roman-Herul battle of 549 as a chance meeting that occurred in the context of the Roman-Lombard attack on the Gepids. If we bear in mind the Heruls' recent defection, their annihilation was perhaps a more significant objective of the military campaign than Procopius implies, and was its principal achievement. This is understandable given the importance of the Heruls as federate troops and as a barrier against barbarian attacks on Illyricum.¹⁴⁷ The gravity of the Heruls' defeat is apparent because thereafter they appear in textual sources only as Roman allies, and are not associated with the Gepids. Indeed, Narses' recruitment of Aruth, Philemuth, and more than three thousand Heruls for the Italian campaign in 552 suggests that the majority of Herul defectors had returned to imperial service by this date.¹⁴⁸

Pohl has argued that the deployment of such a large army to the Balkans in 549 was an extraordinary

140 Ibid. 7.40.1–8

141 Ibid. 8.21.21–22

142 Procopius mentions the recruitment campaigns in passing (ibid. 7.34.41, 7.40.1–11, 7.40.30, 8.21.5, 8.21.19–22, and 8.22.1–2), but devotes large digressions to Slav and Hun raids (ibid. 7.38.1–23, 7.40.1–8, 7.40.31–45, 8.18.18–24, and 8.19.1–22).

143 See ibid. 7.34.40–47, on the Roman campaign of 549. See Christou, *Langobarden* (n. 4 above), 89, on the possibility that John was accompanied by fifteen thousand men, on top of the eleven thousand five hundred Roman cavalry and Herul forces also mentioned.

144 Procopius, *Wars* 7.10.3 and 2.29.10. Belisarius departed for Italy with four thousand men in 542, and Dagistheus arrived in Lazica with eight thousand men in 548.

145 J. R. Martindale, *PLRE*, 3:254–57 on Buzes and 652–61 on John, the nephew of Vitalian.

146 Procopius, *Wars* 7.32.44–46.

147 See ibid. 6.15.36, on Justinian's threat to the Herul defectors.

148 Ibid. 8.26.13.

occurrence that can best be explained in the context of the preparations for a Gothic war in Italy.¹⁴⁹ He stresses that the majority of the Roman army, including its commander, John, the nephew of Vitalian, were under orders to proceed to Italy after their encounter with the Gepids. Although Procopius states that John had these instructions, he does not say the same for the other commanders of the army. Further, he portrays John as accompanying the army on his way to Italy, but not as one of its key commanders, who, as he makes clear, were Aratius, Constantianus, and Buzes.¹⁵⁰ The behavior of the Roman forces subsequent to their defeat of the Heruls and the resultant Gepid-Lombard truce illustrates that their primary purpose was to defend the Balkans. Procopius relates that the Roman army did not proceed further or return to Constantinople, but remained in Dacia for fear of Gepid and Herul raids on Illyricum.¹⁵¹ The army had presumably been ordered to guard the middle Danube frontier zone, the provinces of Upper Moesia, and Dacia Mediterranea.

Justinian's deployment of a large army to the Balkans in 549 was not a unique occurrence. In fact, he expended as many resources on opposing barbarian invasions of the Balkans as he did on recruiting armies for the war in Italy. The importance of the Balkan provinces in Justinian's strategic thinking has perhaps been underestimated because of a failure to recognize this fact; historians often take literally Procopius's pessimistic assessment that Justinian's policy in the region was limited to diplomatic maneuvers and a fortification plan.¹⁵² However, by piecing together the textual references to the deployment of Roman forces in the Balkans, including those in Procopius's *Wars*, it becomes clear that this was an important military arena in its own right. Earlier in his reign, Justinian had deployed the Thracian and Illyrian field armies against Hun raiders in 528; the Illyrian field army against Hun, Bulgar, and Gepid invaders in 529 and 530; the Thracian field army in a series of incursions against the Sklaveni tribes north

of the lower Danube between 531 and 534; the praesental force of Tzittas against Bulgars at Iatrus in 534; and the Illyrian field army of Calluc against the Gepids in 538.¹⁵³ In the late 540s and early 550s, he dispatched the following large armies against the Sklaveni invasions: in 548, the Illyrian field army numbering fifteen thousand men pursued a Sklaveni raiding party in Epirus; in 550, the cavalry force of Asbadus engaged the Sklaveni in the vicinity of Tzurullum, Thrace; in 551, a "considerable army" commanded by Constantianus, Aratius, Nazares, Justin, the son of Germanus, John the Glutton, and Scholasticus the eunuch destroyed a Sklaveni force one day's march from the Long Walls of Thrace, after having suffered an earlier defeat by the same group at Adrianople; and in the same year, Justinian dispatched the generals Justinian and Justin, the sons of Germanus, to chase Sklaveni raiders out of Illyricum.¹⁵⁴ Given the number and frequency of the barbarian raids in this period, there were of course occasions when they were not opposed in the field, for instance, the Sklaveni attack of 550 and the Kutrigur invasion of 551. However, it is striking that the majority of attacks were actively resisted by Roman armies, casting doubt on Procopius's argument that Justinian was content to stand aside while the Balkans were ravaged. The armies sent to fight in the Balkans or in Pannonia during these years were generally different from those being recruited for the Gothic War, showing that the two campaigns were not as closely related as Pohl suggests.¹⁵⁵

Justinian's use of military force in the Balkan and Pannonian regions was reinforced by skillful

149 See n. 3 above.

150 Procopius, *Wars* 7.34.40: "He sent them [the Lombards] more than ten thousand horsemen commanded by Constantianus, Buzes, and Aratius," and 7.24.41: "Associated with them also was John, nephew of Vitalian, who had received previous instructions from the emperor, that as soon as they should fight a decisive battle with the Gepids, he should hasten thence to Italy with his troops."

151 Ibid. 7.34.46–7.

152 See nn. 1 and 2 above.

153 See John Malalas, *Chronographia*, 18.14 and 21, on the wars against the Bosporus Huns in the Black Sea and Thracian areas in 528, and 18.46, on Mundo's defeat of the Huns in Illyricum in 529. See Marcellinus Comes, *Chronicle*, year 530, on his defeat of the Gepids. See Procopius, *Wars* 7.14.1–6, on the military incursions into Sklaveni lands north of the lower Danube by the *magister militum per Thraciam*, Chilbudius, between 531 and 534. See Marcellinus Comes, *Chronicle*, years 534 and 538, on Tzittas's defeat of the Bulgars and Calluc's defeat by the Gepids, respectively. See A. C. Sarantis, *The Balkans during the Reign of Justinian: Barbarian Invasions and Imperial Responses* (forthcoming) for a fuller discussion of these military affairs in the Justinianic Balkans.

154 See n. 142 above for references to these campaigns in Procopius, *Wars*.

155 Of the sixteen generals deployed in the Balkans or against the Gepids in Pannonia in this period, only John, the nephew of Vitalian, Philemuth the Herul, and John the Glutton proceeded to Italy with Narses in 552.

diplomatic maneuvers that enabled him to nullify barbarian invasions against which he had not been able to deploy military resources. For instance, he encouraged the departure of Chinialon's Kutrigurs from the Balkans by forging an alliance with their rivals, the Utigur Huns of Sandil, whom he incited to ravage Kutrigur territory west of the Don River.¹⁵⁶ This persuaded Chinialon and the majority of the Kutrigurs to depart from Roman territory, although two thousand of them were allowed to settle in Thrace as Roman federates under their general Sinnion.

Justinian used diplomacy to the greatest effect in dealing with the Gepid threat. Procopius's passages on the Gepid-Lombard disputes of 550 and 552 point to repeated imperial attempts at instigating an alliance with the Lombards against the Gepids, and the reluctance of these groups to engage in a potentially ruinous military conflict. Procopius explains that fear of the Roman-Lombard alliance prompted the Gepids to sign a peace treaty with the Lombards in 549.¹⁵⁷ It is striking, however, that the Lombards seem to have agreed to this peace without the approval of their Roman allies, whose army was left "helpless."¹⁵⁸ The Lombards' suspicion of Justinian's intentions and their deliberate evasion of a decisive confrontation with the Gepids for as long as possible are also indicated by their inexplicable withdrawal from the battlefield in 550.¹⁵⁹ Following this strange episode, a two-year peace treaty was concluded between the two sides, once again without imperial involvement, after which the Gepids continued to ferry barbarian groups into the Balkans. Justinian nonetheless continued to plot against the Gepids. This is apparent from Procopius's suggestion that the Gepids' awareness of his repeated attempts to instigate a Lombard alliance encouraged them to make contact with the Kutrigurs in 551.¹⁶⁰

However, Justinian renewed his alliance with the Gepids after they had ferried the Sklaveni raiders back across the Danube in 551. The Roman emperor preferred to accede to a new alliance with the Gepids

rather than leave the Balkans open to more attacks. Procopius informs us that Gepid notables arrived in Constantinople, where they received oaths signed by twelve senators.¹⁶¹ The alliance, though, did not put an end to Justinian's determination to constrain Gepid power. This is most evident in his decision, in 552, to renege upon the Gepid alliance, and, for a second time, dispatch forces in support of a Lombard attack on Gepid territory.¹⁶² His justification for this diplomatic U-turn was that the Gepids had ignored the treaty and ferried a second group of Sklaveni into Illyricum.

The Roman army dispatched against the Sklaveni was commanded by Justin and Justinian the sons of Germanus, Suartas the Herul, and Amalafridas the Goth. However, only Amalafridas and his men reached the Lombards and participated in the battle against the Gepids. The remainder of the Roman army had been ordered to wait in the vicinity of Ulpiana, in Dardania, to deal with an uprising in that city motivated by religious grievances (fig. 1). Meanwhile, the Lombard forces, aided by Amalafridas, achieved a crushing victory over the Gepids, compelling the Gepid king Thorisin to sign treaties with both Justinian and the Lombards.¹⁶³ The so-called "Battle of Asfeld," which probably took place on a plain near the route between Siscia and Sirmium, passed into Lombard folklore. Paul the Deacon recorded that the battle was decided when the son of Audoin, the future king Alboin, fought and killed Thorismud, the son of Thorisin.¹⁶⁴

Procopius suggests that the failure of the Roman generals, with the exception of Amalafridas, to reach and aid the Lombards represented a betrayal of the Roman-Lombard alliance. He recounts that envoys sent by the Lombard king Audoin upbraided Justinian for his failure to provide military support despite receiving Lombard recruits to fight against Totila in Italy.¹⁶⁵ Certain secondary accounts have concurred, pointing to Justinian's earlier Gepid alliance as an

156 See Procopius, *Wars* 8.18.18–24, on Justinian's Kutrigur policy of 551.

157 Ibid. 7.34.45.

158 Ibid. 7.34.46.

159 Ibid. 8.18.10, explains the retreat of both sides as the "will of God."

160 Ibid. 8.18.13.

161 Ibid. 8.25.8–10.

162 See ibid. 8.25.10–15, on the Roman-Lombard invasion of Gepid territory in 552.

163 See Procopius, *Wars* 8.25.14–15, on the defeat of the Gepids; 8.27.20–21 refers to the Gepid-Lombard and Gepid-Roman agreements.

164 Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards* 1.23. See Bóna, *Dawn of the Dark Ages* (n. 4 above), chap. 1, on the Battle of Asfeld as related by the Lombard historical tradition.

165 Procopius, *Wars* 8.25.15.

indication that he was not entirely supportive of the Lombards.¹⁶⁶ They argue that he was using the uprising at Ulpiana as a pretext, to await the outcome of the dispute before fully committing to one side. It has also been argued that Justinian promised military support to the Lombards to prevent them from withdrawing the force they had sent to Italy with Narses.¹⁶⁷ To a certain extent, the validity of these arguments rests on the dating of the Gepid-Lombard battle.

As stated earlier, the later dating of the battle to 552 by Stein and Pohl is to be preferred.¹⁶⁸ Diculesscu was one of the first proponents of the earlier date of 551, citing the departure of Lombard and Gepid troops to Italy with Narses in 552 as evidence that the Gepid defeat must have occurred in the previous year.¹⁶⁹ Similarly, Croke has recently questioned the dating of the decisive Gepid-Lombard encounter to 552.¹⁷⁰ By justifying his dating of Jordanes' *Getica* and *Romana* to March 551, he also endeavors to place the Gepid-Lombard battle in the same month, since it is the final event related in the *Romana*. However, this would suggest that all the Balkan episodes mentioned by Procopius as taking place during the seventeenth year of the Gothic War, 551 to 552, took place in the same month. These include the following:

- Narses' departure from Constantinople to Salona and delay at Philippopolis when confronted by Kutrigur Huns
- the Sklaveni invasion of Illyricum; a Roman campaign against this incursion and the Gepids' transportation of the Sklaveni across the Danube and out of Illyricum
- Justinian's reception of a Gepid embassy and arrangement of a treaty
- the Gepids' transportation of a second group of Sklaveni into Illyricum

166 See Christou, *Langobarden* (n. 4 above), 94–96, and Diculesscu, *Gepiden* (n. 5 above), 143–45, who refers to Justinian's "Doppelspiel."

167 Diculesscu, *Gepiden*, 144.

168 See n. 99 above.

169 Diculesscu, *Gepiden*, 146.

170 Croke, "Jordanes and the Immediate Past" (n. 4 above), 483–89.

- Justinian's anger at the Gepids and decision to support a Lombard attack on them
- the consequent recruitment and departure of a large army to support the Lombards
- the delay and division of this army at Ulpiana
- the eventual victory of Amalafridas and the Lombards over the Gepids

Croke correctly points out that Procopius did not necessarily arrange his passages in chronological order. However, even if we accept that Procopius's "war years" ran from March to March (not certain since the Gothic War began in the summer of 535), an attempt to place all these events in one month is surely mistaken. With the exception of Narses' journey from Constantinople, presumably in the spring of 551, Procopius narrates all of the episodes listed above in chronological sequence, so they cannot have taken place in the same month. Although Procopius compresses these events into a relatively brief passage, it is clear that the Gepid-Lombard battle took place at the tail end of a period spanning mid-551 to mid-552.

Croke's suggestion that the Lombard contingent could have been sent to join Narses as early as April 551 is unlikely. Since Narses' force did not set out for Italy until spring 552, this would have meant that the Romans accommodated the Lombard contingent in Dalmatia for over a year. It is unlikely that they would have considered this given the Lombards' violent and unpredictable behavior on Narses' subsequent Gothic campaign and the impracticality of leaving an important military resource to tarry for over a year in Roman territory without seeing action. Procopius's discussion of the Lombard embassy to Justinian subsequent to the attack on Gepid territory is the decisive piece of evidence for the later dating. It suggests that the Lombards had sent their force to join Narses' campaign prior to the battle with the Gepids.¹⁷¹ Indeed, given Audoin's apparent fury at Justinian's failure to send an entire army to support his attack on the Gepids, it is unlikely that he would have supported Narses' campaign if it had not yet commenced.

If we accept that Narses' army set out for Italy prior to the Roman-Lombard invasion of Gepid lands,

171 As argued by Pohl, "Empire and the Lombards" (n. 3 above), 90–91.

it follows that the Gepid threat was an important imperial concern independent of the Gothic War. The composition of Justinian's forces from mainly Herul, Gepid, and Lombard troops drawn from the middle Danube area demonstrates his success in redirecting these barbarians to Italy and away from the Balkans.¹⁷² As Pohl argues, it also shows the increasing strength of the Lombards, who were able to deploy forces simultaneously against the Gepids and the Goths.¹⁷³ It should not be assumed, however, that they did not require Roman support in their attack on the Gepids. Even though the entire Roman army did not reach Audoin, his campaign was nevertheless reinforced by his brother-in-law, Amalafridas, and his followers (ἐπομένους).¹⁷⁴ This was not necessarily a small entourage of followers, as is often presumed. Procopius frequently uses the word ἐπόμενοι to refer to sizeable forces, for example, the large Herul force of Aruth, Mundo's son-in-law, that accompanied Narses to Italy.¹⁷⁵

The penultimate paragraph of Jordanes' *Romana* reinforces the impression that the Lombards were aided by a sizeable Roman contingent in their battle with the Gepids in 552.¹⁷⁶ It ambiguously states that Audoin's wife (who was a niece of Theodahad), accompanied by Lombard nobles in the service of the Roman emperor, reached the camp that was arrayed against the Gepids before the Lombards crossed over from their side, presumably into Gepid territory. Jordanes claims that more than sixty thousand men were lost in the ensuing battle, and that such a battle had not been witnessed in that region since the days of Attila. Even though his massive figure of sixty thousand is almost certainly exaggerated, both Jordanes' and Procopius's texts show that in the eyes of contemporaries the battle was extremely significant and involved a large number of troops, many of whom were in the service of the Roman emperor. Since Audoin's wife was the sister of Amalafridas and, according to Jordanes, the Lombard nobles with her were somehow servants of the Roman Empire, it may be inferred that they represented a Lombard embassy to Justinian that had requested military support and

secured the services of Amalafridas. That the Gepids signed a peace treaty with both the Lombards and the Romans, in contrast to their actions in 549 and 550, also suggests that Roman involvement in their defeat was more significant than suggested by Procopius.

The close relationship of Amalafridas, a high-ranking Roman general, and Audoin, the Lombard king, highlights the strength of Roman-Lombard relations during these years. Amalafridas was one of the noble Gothic captives brought to Constantinople by Belisarius with King Wittigis in 540.¹⁷⁷ A grandson of Amalafrida, Theoderic the Great's sister, and son of the last Thuringian king, Hermanafid, he later became the brother-in-law of the Lombard king Audoin when the latter married his sister at some point between 540 and 552. Of the Roman generals dispatched from Constantinople, Amalafridas was the obvious choice to send to the aid of the Lombards. If the invasion of Gepid territory had gone wrong and the Gepids cried foul over their betrayal, Justinian could have absolved himself of blame by citing Amalafridas's Gothic ethnicity and relationship to Audoin.

The secondary references to Justinian's betrayal of the Lombards should not be dismissed entirely. Although he did not dishonor his alliance with the Lombards, the notion that he did not want the Gepids to be subjugated is persuasive.¹⁷⁸ His main aim seems to have been to restore the balance of power achieved in the late 530s and leave in place two subservient client states that could be played off one another. Indeed, although defeated, the Gepids suffered no major territorial losses, and they retained control of Sirmium. Further, Justinian's instructions to the Roman army imply that his principal concern was to ensure the security of the Balkan provinces. It was vital that the remaining generals and their forces stay in northern Illyricum, not only to deal with the religious uprising at Ulpiana, but, as in 549, to defend the northern Illyrian provinces that were, on this occasion, recently vacated by the Illyrian field army and its Gepid, Lombard, and Herul allies who were dispatched on Narses' expedition to Italy.¹⁷⁹ The plausibility of Procopius's reference to

172 See Procopius, *Wars* 8.26.5–13, on the composition of Narses' army.

173 Pohl, "Langobarden" (n. 3 above), 33.

174 Procopius, *Wars* 8.25.13.

175 Ibid. 8.26.13.

176 Jordanes, *Romana* (n. 83 above), 52.

177 See Procopius, *Wars* 8.25.11–13, on Amalafridas.

178 Christou, *Langobarden*, 96; Diclescu, *Gepiden*, 145–46.

179 It is far less likely that this force was intended to be a strategic reserve instructed to defend routes into Italy, as suggested by Pohl, "Empire and the Lombards," 94.

religious unrest at Ulpiana is strengthened by the propapal leanings of the Illyrian population, which must have been aggrieved at Justinian's retention of Pope Vigilius at Constantinople since 547 and his promulgation of the *Edict on the Faith* in 551.¹⁸⁰

The joint forces of Audoin and Amalafridas ensured that the Gepid threat was subdued; and subsequently, the Gepids ceased to represent a major threat to the Balkan provinces. As stated earlier, it is no coincidence that the Slav and Hun raids ceased for most of the 550s. Consequently, Justinian was able to reassign high-profile generals and major armies from the Balkans to Italy and Lazica. For example, by 554 Justin, the son of Germanus, having previously participated in a series of Balkan campaigns, was one of the main commanders in Lazica.¹⁸¹ When a barbarian threat to the Balkans did resurface in the late 550s and early 560s, it was posed by Kutrigur Huns and Avars from the Black Sea region.

In 566, the Gepids inflicted a defeat upon the Lombards, but only with the help of the Roman Empire, now led by the emperor Justin II. However, having refused to give up control of Sirmium to the Romans, apparently a stipulation of the 566 alliance, the Gepids lost the support of the empire. They succumbed to an Avar-Lombard alliance in 567, and were absorbed by the Avar Khaganate along with other barbarian groups in Pannonia and Dacia.¹⁸² According to Paul the Deacon, the Lombard king Alboin marked the destruction of the Gepid army by making a drinking

goblet out of the Gepid king Cunimund's skull. He later married Rosamund, Cunimund's daughter.¹⁸³ One year later, the Lombards chose to migrate to northern Italy rather than confront the formidable Avars. These events signaled the end of the history of the Gepids. Sirmium, which the Romans took possession of in 567, was finally destroyed in the aftermath of its capitulation to the Avars in 582.¹⁸⁴

Conclusions

Justinian's containment of a Gepid threat was one of the principal achievements of his successful foreign policy vis-à-vis the barbarian world north of the Danube. He did not merely attempt to limit the damage caused to the Balkans by playing various barbarian groups against one another as and when they posed a threat. Rather, Justinian's approach consisted of an aggressive proactive strategy of projecting imperial power within and beyond the Balkan provinces through both diplomatic and military initiatives. The symbolic, historical, and strategic importance of western Illyricum, in particular Pannonia Sirmiensis and its capital, Sirmium, meant that during the early years of Justinian's reign it occupied an important place in the western reconquest. At the same time, Justinian needed to hold in check the considerable manpower resources of the Gothic and, later, Gepid and Lombard kingdoms of southern Pannonia, lest they seriously threaten the Illyrian provinces. By harnessing this manpower Justinian could achieve his aims of controlling the Pannonian provinces, defending the Balkans, and, on occasion, strengthening Roman armies on campaign in other arenas, including Italy.

During the early years of his reign, imperial alliances with Gepids, Heruls, and the Gepid warlord, Mundo, meant that the conquest of Gothic-held Sirmium and southern Pannonia seemed a realistic aim. However, following the defeats and deaths of the *magistri militum per Illyricum*, Mundo and Calluc, the Gepid occupation of Sirmium, and reverses in Africa, Italy, and the East in the early 540s, Justinian limited himself to controlling the Pannonian region indirectly through military alliances with the Lombards

180 See Jones, *Later Roman Empire* (n. 1 above), 893, on the traditional authority of the papacy over Illyricum, and C. Sotinel, "Emperors and Popes in the Sixth Century: The Western View," in Maas, *Age of Justinian*, 279–84, on the reaction of the papacy and papal regions to the Three Chapters controversy of the 540s and 550s. See Marcellinus Comes, *Chronicle*, year 516, on Anastasius's retention and possible maltreatment of the Illyrian bishops Alcissus of Nicopolis, Gaianus of Naissus, who perished while in the capital, and Laurence of Heraclea Lyncestis, who was held as an exile. On the various causes of Vitalian's Balkan insurgency between 514 and 516, in which the propapal, orthodox, anti-Chalcedonian position of the Illyrian population is prominent, see Martindale, *PLRE* (n. 145 above), 2:1170–76, Nicks, "Reign of Anastasius" (n. 35 above), 50–68, and Croke, *Chronicle* (n. 31 above), 116–20, notes to his translation.

181 See Agathias, *The Histories*, trans. J. D. Frendo (Berlin, 1975), or Agathias, *Agathiae Myrinaei Historiarum libri quinque*, ed. R. Keydell (Berlin, 1967), 2.18 to 4.30.10 on the Lazican War 554–57.

182 See Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 6.10.7–10.12, on 566, and Menander Protector, *The History of Menander the Guardsman*, ed. and trans. R. C. Blockley (Liverpool, 1985), 12.1–2, on the Avaro-Lombard conquest of the Gepids in 567.

183 Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards* (n. 86 above), 1.27.6.

184 Mirković, "Sirmium" (n. 68 above), 58–59.

and the Gepids, and his federate agreement with the Heruls. The arrival of Gepid and Lombard envoys in Constantinople in 548, following the deterioration of relations between their peoples, demonstrates that Justinian's authority was required to maintain a balance of political power and security in southern Pannonia. However, the threat to this client-state system posed by increasing Gepid military and naval strength meant that a more aggressive approach was once again necessary.

By closely analyzing the available textual evidence for these events, I have demonstrated that Justinian's confrontation of the Gepids was primarily intended to bolster the security of the Balkan provinces, and was not dictated by the Gothic War in Italy. The numerous forces sent against Sklaveni invaders of the Balkans and against the Gepids in 549 and 552 were commanded by high-ranking Roman generals, were often composed of Balkan field troops, and bore little relation to those recruited to fight in Italy from 552, who were predominantly Germanic allied or federate troops, and actually departed for Italy prior to the final Roman-Lombard defeat of the Gepids. The Roman armies sent to Pannonia in 549 and 552 that did not eventually engage the Gepids remained in northern Illyricum defending routes into the Balkans and, in 552, putting down a religious uprising at Ulpiana; they did not proceed to Italy. Although barbarian attacks on the Balkans frustrated recruitment campaigns for the Gothic War, and the Gepid-Lombard crises potentially obstructed an overland invasion of Italy, the consequences of the Gepids' increasing military and naval power were more severe for the Balkan provinces, which were invaded by Sklaveni in 548, 550, and three times in 551, and by Kutrigur Huns in 551. Although Procopius's passages on the Gepid-Lombard crises are embedded in his Gothic wars narrative, they relate more closely to the Balkan raids than to the recruitment campaigns for the Gothic War, on which he includes far fewer digressions.

It is easy to view the late fifth- to sixth-century barbarian world through the prisms of the late sixth- to seventh-century Avaro-Slav invasions or of the Gothic and Lombard legitimizing histories, and to ignore the Gepids, who did not achieve the successes of the Goths, Lombards, Avars, or Slavs. This examination of Justinian's Gepid policy has emphasized, however, that in the mid-Justinianic period the Gepids seemed the group most likely to unify a geopolitically

fragmented barbarian world and constitute a major barbarian power north of the Danube. From their foothold in Pannonia Sirmiensis, the Gepids of King Thorisin were able, like the Avars after them, to absorb barbarian elements in that region, threaten to conquer the Lombards' Pannonian territories, and, by the late 540s, unleash a series of barbarian attacks on Illyricum through their command of the river crossings into the Dacian diocese.

This interpretation contradicts Pohl's assessment of the Gepids as a generally passive group, characterized by a large agricultural base and a small, ineffective military elite. Certainly they suffered serious defeats—to the Goths in 488, 504, and 530, and to the Lombards in 552 and 567. However, despite serious setbacks in the defeats of 488 and 504, and the defection of the formidable general Mundo, the Gepids' survival of the politically turbulent period between the mid-fifth and mid-sixth centuries suggests that, like the Goths, they possessed a strong ethnic identity, which was defined by and embodied in a more substantial ruling class than is indicated by Pohl. This must have been as important as a stable agricultural base in supporting their stay in Trajanic Dacia for more than a century and in southern Pannonia between 473 and 504, and 536 and 567. Their failure to colonize and establish a political entity within the provinces of the Roman Empire does not mean that the Gepids should be viewed as a weak and passive group. A close analysis of the textual sources reveals that they threatened and invaded the Roman Empire on numerous occasions. First, the realization that Marcellinus Comes terms the Gepids "Getae" reveals that they launched far-reaching invasions of the Balkan provinces in 517 and 530. Second, Procopius records Gepid raids on Aurelian Dacia in the late 530s and Gepid instigation of a series of damaging Slav and Hun incursions against the Balkan provinces in the 540s and 550s.

It might be argued that the Gepids were ultimately too belligerent toward the Romans at a time when they had yet to vanquish their principal enemies in the Pannonian region. Pannonia Sirmiensis was as strategically vulnerable as it was advantageous—a low-lying, marshy territory, accessible along a series of routes from Northern Pannonia, Dalmatia, Italy, and the Balkans. Therefore, it is unlikely that the Gepids could ever have repelled a joint Roman-Lombard attack. However, unlike the Huns of Attila before them and the Avars of the Khagan Baian after them, the Gepids began posing a

serious threat to the Empire without having unified the barbarian world north of the Danube. This move incited Justinian to exercise his diplomatic influence and military power against them. After the plague and financial and military crises of the early 540s, Justinian's willingness to dispatch sizeable armies to the Balkans, his ability to manipulate barbarian manpower resources in the middle Danube and Black Sea regions, and his consistent attempts to incite Lombard aggression against the Gepids allowed him to contain and eventually weaken the Gepids, leaving them vulnerable to absorption by the Avars. Although Justinian did not recapture the Pannonian provinces, he had at least safeguarded the Italian campaign, maintained Roman diplomatic authority in Pannonia, and prevented the Gepids from

continuing to threaten Balkan security. Had his successor, Justin II, adopted a similar approach, the Avars might have been contained, and the Lombards prevented from migrating to northern Italy. In addition, the Gepids might have survived to produce the sort of legitimizing history or archaeological legacy that has made the early history of groups such as the Lombards, the Avars, and the Goths so much better known to modern historians. This would have drastically altered the future political history and ethnic composition of northern Italy and the Hungarian Plain.

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